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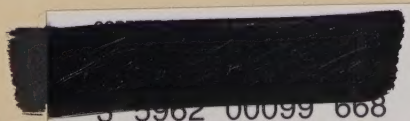

LITERARY LIVES

EDITED BY

W. ROBERTSON NICOLL

COVENTRY PATMORE

LITERARY LIVES

Edited by W. Robertson Nicoll, LL.D.

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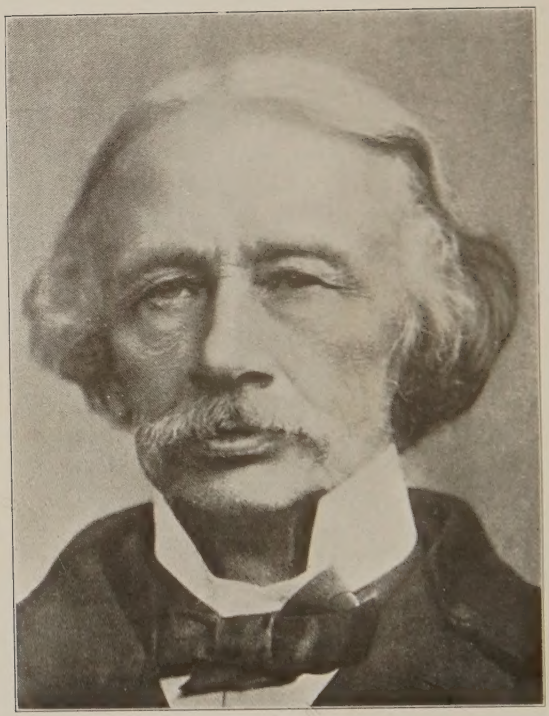

The Draycott Gallery

Coventry Patmore.

Literary Lives

COVENTRY PATMORE

BY

EDMUND GOSSE

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1905

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PREFACE

THE chief, and almost the only, public source of information about the facts of Patmore's life is the *Memoirs and Correspondence*, in two volumes, published by Mr. Basil Champneys in 1900. Mr. Champneys, whose work was performed with admirable judgment and sympathy, was supplied with all the necessary documents by Mrs. Patmore, whose "devoted foresight during her husband's life, and indefatigable industry then and later," are cordially acknowledged by the biographer. This large work was not a memoir of Coventry Patmore alone, but of his parents, his wives, his deceased children, and many of his relatives. As a collection of documents, extremely full and authentic, it can never be superseded.

The present little volume is intended to supplement the official biography on the critical side. Mr. Champneys dealt with the records of Patmore's life, and of his surroundings. He had little space left in which to consider the works, which, indeed, could scarcely be analysed impartially in a family memoir. To the character and to the writings of Coventry Patmore, with whom for many years I enjoyed the privilege of a close friendship, I had long given careful attention; and this book, although delayed in publication

until now, represents impressions which its author formed during Patmore's life or shortly afterwards. I have been glad to revise my record of facts by collation with Mr. Champneys' authoritative statements, but the opinions are my own and were defined long ago. In May, 1884, Patmore proposed to appoint me his literary executor, and although he presently released me from a duty which appeared to me better fitted to a member of his own communion, the idea that I might be called upon to give my impressions of his work thus became familiar to me.

The Editor of this series has kindly allowed me to interpolate in this monograph certain observations and notes which I published, soon after Patmore's death, in the *North American Review* and in the *Contemporary Review*. These impressions were very carefully recorded while they were quite fresh in my memory, and I could not have put them into another shape without impairing their fidelity.

To Mrs. Meynell, who, during the latest years of his life, shared the intellectual confidences of Patmore to a deeper degree than any other friend, I owe my warmest thanks for the communication of some invaluable documents.

E. G.

July, 1904.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS (1823–1846)

COVENTRY PATMORE was the grandson of a silversmith of Ludgate Hill, whose son, Peter George Patmore (1786–1855), adopted the profession of letters, and was associated with Charles Lamb, Hazlitt, John Hamilton Reynolds and the minor writers of the so-called Cockney School. P. G. Patmore was a notorious rather than a distinguished author, and it is difficult to reconcile the species of abhorrence with which most of his contemporaries regarded him, with the bold and pious claims to our respect which his son never ceased to put forward. It was a permanent annoyance to Coventry Patmore that his father was treated as a black sheep by his acquaintances, and he made many efforts to upset what he said was a malignant legend. This was the more honourable to his affection because the reputation of his father had inflicted serious injury on himself as a youth. Not only, when the poet was twenty-two, did his father suddenly disappear

to the Continent, leaving him without resources, but P. G. Patmore's ugly fame in respect to the Scott duel constantly rose before the younger man as an obstacle to his progress. Robert Browning told me that when, in 1846, at the house of Barry Cornwall, he asked Thackeray to let him introduce the young Coventry Patmore to him, the novelist boisterously refused, adding, "I won't touch the hand of a son of that murderer!" That Thackeray, in his generous way, immediately repented, acknowledging that the son was not responsible for the father, and that he hastened to help the former as "a most deserving and clever young fellow who will be a genius some day," does not detract from the impression which the original outburst gives us of P. G. Patmore's being regarded as a kind of social outlaw.

He owed this unpleasant position to peculiarities of temperament, which it is easier to-day to feel than to define, but mainly to his conduct in the too-famous duel in which John Scott, the editor of the *London Magazine,* was fatally wounded by Lockhart's friend Christie. Scott had pressed his quarrel, which was a literary one, upon Christie, and on both sides the seconds seem to have been much more bloodthirsty than their principals. Christie fired his first shot into the air, and Scott, it was thought, would have done

the same if Patmore, who acted as Scott's second, had not insisted, "You must not speak, you have nothing for it now but firing." Under his second's pressure, therefore, Scott aimed at Christie, who in response shot him dead. This conduct on Patmore's part was universally blamed, and Scott in dying seems to have corroborated the popular impression. The fullest, indeed the only, coherent account of this unhappy affair is that which is given by Mr. Lang in his *Life of John Gibson Lockhart;* the exact circumstances being still obscure, so far at least as Patmore's responsibility is concerned. But it has to be said that his whole attitude afterwards,—which is of more real importance to us in forming a judgment than his behaviour through a few heated minutes of crisis can be,—does not impress us, as it certainly did not impress his contemporaries, with a sense of P. G. Patmore's delicacy or gentlemanly feeling. His son, however, defended him through thick and thin, and would not permit the least aspersion of his honour to pass unchallenged. It seems probable that it was in the capacity of father to his brilliant eldest boy that Peter George Patmore displayed the most attractive side of his character. He was a sympathetic, proud and ambitious parent, and an encourager of Coventry's genius. In our present

inquiry we may be content frankly to record so much.

In 1822, the year after the duel, Peter George Patmore married a Scotch lady, Eliza Robertson, and the first of their four children, COVENTRY KERSEY DIGHTON PATMORE, was born at Woodford, in Essex, on July 23, 1823. We may note, in passing, that the poet was of the generation of George Eliot, Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, who were slightly older, and of Woolner, Huxley and D. G. Rossetti, who were slightly younger than he. The childhood of Coventry Patmore seems to have been irregular and free; he was subjected to none of the usual discipline of family life. His father was abetted in spoiling him by the grandmother, whom Coventry, in his large way, was wont in after years to describe as "one of the strongest-minded and most intellectual women" he had ever met. She doted on her eldest grandson, and seems to have distinguished him from his brothers by lavishing upon him a peculiar fondness. He used to declare that the earliest sentence he spoke distinctly was "Coventry is a clever fellow," repeated from his grandmother's lips. From the first his own mother was estranged from him by this extravagant partiality of his father and his grandmother. Patmore said that his mother counted for nothing

in his early training, except as a dark figure which it was always wise and generally easy to evade. She was repellent in manner, and Mr. Basil Champneys records that she welcomed Coventry's first wife without cordiality or tact. Patmore told me that when his earliest volume of poems was published his mother neither affected any interest in it nor would read a page of it. She died in her son's house in 1851, the grandmother following at the age of ninety-three in 1853, and the father at the age of sixty-nine in 1855.

In constant and successful revolt against the sternness of his mother, and encouraged by the flatteries of his father and grandmother, Coventry Patmore grew up a strange child, priggish, enthusiastic, eccentric. His marked intellectual gifts gave him an easy predominance over his younger brothers, who were treated as if belonging to a less privileged class. They were all lucky enough to spend a good deal of time in the country house of their grand-uncle, Robert Stevens, in Epping Forest. It must now be noted that our information about Patmore's doings for the next dozen years depends exclusively upon his own recollections.

This memoir will be unsuccessful in giving a true picture of an extraordinary man if it does not cope with the apparent inconsistencies of his

temperament. It is best to say at once that though Coventry Patmore had a genuine passion for truth, and was sincere and direct to an unusual and admirable degree, he had yet no historical instinct. His dates were always uncertain, and his record of incidents seldom tallied with the humdrum procession of facts. In the warm and misty atmosphere of his imagination, things took an exaggerated shape and a distorted direction. His memory amplified quantities before they could reach his lips in words, and he habitually talked in a sort of guarded hyperbole. Doubtless this tendency to precise yet overstrained statement grew upon him in later years, but it was in these years that all his recollections of childhood were written down or spoken. It ought not to be difficult, with caution, to translate his anecdotes back out of Patmorese, but this has not always been done. For instance, when we are gravely told that Coventry and his brothers had an "amusement," which they imposed upon themselves, which consisted of tying each other's hands behind their backs, closing their eyes and jumping into a quick-set hedge, while "he who bore the experience with the least flinching was considered the victor," our first impression is that the story of the Greek boy and the fox is at last outdone, and our second that the family must

have habitually resembled a set of Heidelberg students fresh from the duello. But calmer thoughts remind us that this is simply a specimen of Patmorese, that perhaps once some such contest was proposed, or even attempted, and that the idea firmly implanted itself in the poet's mind. One dash of bramble across the cheek would be enough on which to build this structure of Spartan discipline.

Guarding ourselves, therefore, against our subject's constitutional tendency to emphasis, we obtain from the various records of Patmore's childhood an impression, not merely interesting in itself, but consistent with the later history of the man. He displayed at a very early age some of the leading characteristics of his future years, an indomitable doggedness of will, a passion for books, a tendency to mystical contemplation. He quaintly states, in his fragment of an autobiography, that he was an Agnostic until his eleventh year, when he happened to open a devotional book, whereupon, he says, " it struck me what an exceedingly fine thing it would be if there really was a God." But this feeling soon subsided, and he seems to date his first direct tendency towards religion from the time when he was in Paris, as a lad of eighteen. Meanwhile, " for some two or three years before I was fifteen

I had devoted all my spare time, with great assiduity, to science, especially chemistry, in which I made real advance. My father greatly encouraged me in such studies, of which he knew something himself, and he strained his not very abundant means to enable me to fit up a laboratory, with furnaces and other apparatus. I did not stop at repeating the experiments of others, but carried on original investigations, not altogether without results, among which was the discovery of a new chloride of bromine." That new chloride of bromine was an impressive ornament of conversation in Patmore's later years, and was always received, of course, in respectful silence. But one would like to have had Faraday's opinion.

Whether Patmore was a pioneer in chemistry or no, his proficiency in general science seems to have been remarkable. He studied mathematics, "until there were no properly algebraic difficulties which I had not overcome." A friend pronounced him, when he was about sixteen, "able to rank as a Senior Optime at the Mathematical Tripos." Patmore dwelt on all this because, as he said, "there are many persons who entertain the strange opinion that ignorance of natural science is a qualification for forming a right judgment in spiritual matters." It is, indeed, a strange opinion,

since Newton and Euler are far from being the only great mathematicians who have cultivated a child-like piety. This phase in Patmore's boyhood culminated in its being proposed that he should be sent to Cambridge, where he might have competed with Stokes and Cayley. But his father shrank from the expense of life at the University.

Such absorption in natural science, in which the poet perhaps exaggerated his recollections of an intelligent childish pastime, seems inconsistent with the definite literary training to which, it is certain, his father began to subject him from the age of fourteen. "My father," he says, "did all he could to develop my still greater ardour for poetry and the best sort of prose. His own taste was so severely good that, at fifteen, I cared little for any but the classics of English literature. At this age I had read almost all the standard poetry and much of the best secular prose in our language, and was in the habit of studying it critically." To bring this statement within the range of credibility, however, it should be remarked that the elder Patmore had a way of marking in pencil what he considered the very best passages in each writer. These, and these only, he commended to his son's attention, and Coventry, in his juvenile arrogance, took a pleasure in reading nothing which was not so marked.

This is what he means by studying poetry "critically"; the better word would be "eclectically." But the habit thus early formed of selecting and appropriating only what a high standard of taste presented to him as the best influenced Patmore to the end of his life, and was a very important element in his intellectual training. He was taught to prefer a collection of specimens to a general system of knowledge, and his notion of a poetic garden became a posy of rare flowers. In the passage just quoted he undoubtedly overestimates his acquaintance with English literature as a whole; he had given impassioned meditation to brilliant fragments of a multitude of authors, but there were few of which he possessed a complete or general knowledge. All his critical judgments, from first to last, bore the stamp of his eclecticism.

A notable exception to his habit of selecting was, however, the complete study he made, as a boy, and constantly repeated in manhood, of the plays of Shakespeare. Here, also, perhaps, he was an eclectic, choosing Shakespeare from all the authors of England as the one best worthy of detailed consideration. His own earliest literary productions were two essays, the one on *Macbeth,* the other on the *Two Gentlemen of Verona,* which were published many years later, and to

which the author was inclined to assign an extremely early date. A letter from his father proves that Coventry had begun to write verses before he went to France in the summer of 1839, and from another source we know that these included the first drafts of "The River," and "The Woodman's Daughter." It seems certain that the Shakespearian essays were composed about the same time, and we have therefore the occasion to observe Coventry Patmore as a writer of considerable versatility and talent before he enters his seventeenth year. His father now sent him to St. Germain, in order to improve his French, and he stayed at this school for six months. But, he tells us, "as my father stipulated that I should have an apartment of my own, and should live with the headmaster's family, learning from private tutors, and not in the classes, I did not mix with the other boys, nor learn to talk very fluently." He used to spend "all his Sundays" at the house in Paris of Mrs. Catherine Gore, the then highly-popular author of fashionable novels, ridiculed later on by Thackeray. "She had a fine apartment in the Place Vendôme, and, on Sundays, her rooms were full of the best literary and political society of Paris." Coventry Patmore was too young and too inexperienced to profit by the social advantages of

Mrs. Gore's probably rather flashy saloon. The author of *Cecil: or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb,* though the wife of a needy lifeguardsman and forced by her husband's poverty to pour forth a stream of social romances, was a personage of some importance in the elder Patmore's circle of acquaintances. He is seen at this time to be solicitous that Coventry shall cultivate so important a friend. Mrs. Gore had an attractive daughter, of about eighteen, who afterwards became Lady Edward Thynne. For this girl he "entertained a passion of a kind not uncommon in youths, a passion which neither hoped nor cared much for a return. . . . I remember praying more than once, with torrents of tears, that the young lady might be happy, especially in marriage, with whomsoever it might be." He was very shy, and Miss Gore used to snub him unmercifully. The incident would scarcely be notable, were it not that in later years Patmore always attributed to this "calf-love" the earliest awakening of his apprehensions of love in the peculiarly metaphysical form in which it afterwards appealed to him. In Miss Gore he worshipped the earliest of a series of "angels" who were the avatars, as it were, of his ideal. There is no doubt that at this time there was a remarkable development of his psychological powers, and that he began towards

the end of 1839 to be in the strict sense himself, and no longer a mirror of the minds around him. He attributes to this period the assumption of a power "to discern sexual impurity and virginal purity, the one as the tangible blackness and horror of hell, and the other as the very bliss of heaven, and the flower and consummation of love between man and woman." If his memory of these meditations and apprehensions was correct, and it probably was, at the age of seventeen he had learned the central principles which were to guide the philosophy of his life.

A Parisian phrenologist, named Deville, examined Coventry Patmore's head, and pronounced it to be that of a poet. On his return to London, the youth determined seriously to cultivate the art of verse, and he spent a long time (he says "about a year") in polishing and completing the two pieces which he seems to have begun before he went to St. Germain. These were "The River," and "The Woodman's Daughter," which occupy together about forty pages of his earliest volume. His father had these poems set up in type, desiring him to write others and immediately bring out a book. But the boy's inclination or talent failed him. None of these original proofs of 1840 seem to be in existence; if they were, it would be interesting, and indeed

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important, to compare them with the text of the same lyrics in 1844, the publication of Tennyson's *Poems* of 1842 having intervened between the two events. It would appear that the elder Patmore sent copies of the original proofs to several persons of critical distinction, and in particular to Barry Cornwall, to Laman Blanchard and to Leigh Hunt. The latter was at this time a person of great authority on the Liberal side of the world of letters, the triumphant success of his *Legend of Florence* having at last, at the age of fifty-six, made him the centre of much public curiosity. In his benevolent way, Leigh Hunt was very complimentary about Coventry Patmore's early poems, and the youthful poet, perhaps late in 1840, paid a visit to him. Nearly half a century later, he gave the following vivid account of the incident:—

"I set off with a letter from my father, an old friend of the poet, informing him of my ambition to see him. Arriving at his house, a very small one in a small square somewhere in the extreme West, after a walk of some five or six miles, I was informed that the poet was at home, and asked to sit down until he came to me. This he did after I had waited in the parlour at least two hours, when the door was opened and a most picturesque gentleman, with hair flowing nearly

or quite to his shoulders, a beautiful velvet coat and a Vandyke collar of lace about a foot deep, appeared, rubbing his hands and smiling ethereally, and saying, without a word of preface or notice of my having waited so long, 'This is a beautiful world, Mr. Patmore!' I was so struck by this remark that it has eclipsed all memory of what occurred during the remainder of my visit."

Leigh Hunt was to be a generous supporter of Coventry Patmore in his earliest efforts, and the younger man was a sincere admirer of *Rimini* and of the *Indicator*. In later years, he spoke of Leigh Hunt to Aubrey de Vere as worthy of honour, "a true poet and a zealous lover of poetry." But there was a certain flavour or perfume about the literary character of Leigh Hunt which ultimately became highly distasteful to Patmore, and this, no doubt, affects with a needless harshness the picturesque portrait which has just been quoted.

Of the next four years we possess slight record. In 1842, after going through a solitary crisis of religious despondency which seems to have checked for the time being the development of his intellect, the young Patmore made a visit of several months to some relatives in Edinburgh. "They were very pious members of the then newborn Free Kirk, and were the first religious persons

I had ever had anything to do with. I was at first greatly delighted with this atmosphere, and the warmth with which I communicated my own aspirations much interested my new friends in me; but the inequality of my moods startled and somewhat shocked one of my aunts, who told me that my strange alternations of ardent effort and despondent indifference reminded her of Saul." He was urged to make testimony of his faith, and in particular was desired to deliver extemporaneous prayer aloud, at a prayer-meeting. He was the shyest of youths, and we can easily imagine "the agony with which, at the request of my new friends, I dropped on my knees in their presence, and remained there utterly incapable of venting a word, and at last rose silent, confused and ashamed." His Scotch relations were unceasing in their expressions of Protestant horror with regard to the Roman Faith, and Patmore was conscious of "a moment's attractive thought," born of their pious excesses, that the much abused Catholics might after all be possibly in the right. But this immediately passed away, and did not recur for several years.

Love and Religion were the two masters which led the spirit of Patmore through the whole of his earthly journey, and if we would follow the evolution of his character, we must not neglect

Emily Augusta Patmore.

From portrait by Sir John E. Millais, P.R.A., 1851
Reproduced from Basil Champneys' "Coventry Patmore" by kind permission of Messrs. Geo. Bell & Sons

any evidence of the work of either. The following sonnet, then, written in 1843, and not, I think, reprinted until now since 1844, has a biographical value:—

At nine years old I was Love's willing Page:
Poets love earlier than other men,
And would love later, but for the prodigal pen.
"Oh! wherefore hast thou, Love, ceased now to engage
Thy servitor, found true in every stage
Of all the eleven springs gone by since then?"
Vain quest!—and I no more Love's denizen,
Sought the poor leisure of the Golden Age.
But lately wandering, from the world apart,
Chance brought me where, before her quiet nest,
A village-girl was standing without art.
My soul sprang up from its lethargic rest,
The slack veins tightened all across my heart.

The poet forgets that between nine years and twenty had occurred sixteen, when the soul's "lethargic rest" was broken by the image of Miss Gore, but the sincerity of this sonnet is obvious. It was probably the latest piece composed for the volume of *Poems by Coventry Patmore* which appeared in 1844, from the shop of Moxon.

The publication of Tennyson's two volumes of *Poems* in 1842 formed a crisis in the history of English verse. In the presence of that new, or

newly observed, planet, other stars seemed insignificant. The circle which had begun to form around the boyish Patmore felt it necessary to assert its allegiance; we find Laman Blanchard declaring that his "strong and clear conviction of the extreme beauty and finish" of young Coventry's MS. verse was not affected by the new luminary; "nothing that Tennyson has done" need cause despair in Patmore. But the resonance of Tennyson's success induced the friends of Patmore to delay, and it was not until 1844, when the poet was just of age, that Moxon published the thin green volume of *Poems by Coventry Patmore,* which is now a great biographical rarity. A poet's first book is always an important milestone in his career; the journey of life is not the same after this earliest experience. This was peculiarly the case with Patmore, who had been surrounded by care and praise, daintily brought up in an atmosphere of cultured encouragement, and for whom the final disclosure to the world was expected to be an actual blossoming of the aloe. His father, with pardonable but foolish pride, had exaggerated the solemnity, the importance of his son's poetic mission. The picture of Coventry, which Mr. Champneys has restored from P. G. Patmore's *Chatsworth,* is mawkish with parental fatuity. The only phrase it con-

tains, which possesses any value, is the following, in which the personal appearance of Coventry Patmore at the age of twenty is preserved for us:—

"See! his lithe, fragile form is bending over a book, that is spread open on his knees, his head drooping towards it like a plucked flower. The pale face is resting on the clasped hand, over which, and all round the small, exquisitely modelled head, fall heavy waves of auburn hair, concealing all but one pale cheek—pale and cold as marble, but smooth and soft as a girl's."

The *Poems* of 1844, however, as we look back upon it across sixty years, was a volume which might excuse in a father a somewhat rhapsodical burst of language. There could be no question that, with strange lapses of taste and lack of finish, it had a real distinction of its own. It spoke, not in borrowed tones, but in the voice of a new person. The effect of the pieces has become faint; their perfume has mainly evaporated. But it is easy to understand that they awakened hope and enthusiasm. The poet's biographers have dwelt upon the wild guesses which contemporary reviewers made as to the source of his inspiration. He was accused of imitating Leigh Hunt, Proctor, and Keats, but there is no trace of these writers upon his style. Nor is it easy

to discover any but the most general characteristics of Wordsworth or even Coleridge in the texture or form of Patmore's early verses. One influence there is, and it is one which his critics have uniformly, but very strangely, failed to recognize. All through the book he is under the spell of certain lyrics published by his elder contemporary, Elizabeth Barrett, and it is of her, and not of Tennyson or Coleridge, that the lad continually reminds us.

To realize this influence it is necessary to refer, not to the later revisions of such pieces as "Sir Hubert" and "The River," but to their original text in 1844. Miss Barrett had published in 1838 her collection of pieces in many styles, entitled *The Seraphim, and Other Poems.* This contained, in their earliest form, some of the most characteristic of her lyrics,—for instance, "Cowper's Grave," "Isobel's Child," and "The Sleep." It also contained several naïvely psychological studies of sentiment, of which "The Poet's Vow" is a prominent example. Coventry Patmore began to write verses in 1839, shortly after the publication of *The Seraphim,* and the form and spirit of his earliest pieces is curiously and sometimes closely coloured by his admiration for the new poetess. In such a poem as the following, even in the technical imperfection of the second

stanza, it is of Miss Barrett, and not of Tennyson or Coleridge, that the ear is reminded:—

I knew a soft-eyed lady, from a noble foreign land ;
Her words, I thought, were lowest when we walked out hand in hand.
I began to say, "God pleasing, I shall have her for my bride."
Bitter, bitter, bitter was it to me when she died.

In the street a man since stopped me : in a noble foreign tongue
He said he was a stranger, poor, and strangers all among.
I know your thoughts, yet tell you, World,—I gave him all I had.
But I—I'm much the wisest ;—it is you, O World ! that's mad.

He stared upon the proffered purse; then took it, hand and all.
O! what a look he gave me, while he kept my hand in thrall!
And press'd it with a gratitude that made the blushes start ;
For I had not deserved it, and it smote me to the heart.

The moment was one of revival in the popular estimate of poetry, succeeding a long obscuration. But the opposition of the press was still violent, and suspicion of both passion and simplicity in verse was loudly expressed in high places. The reviews, after twenty years, were still in doubt how to spell the name of Keats, and treated him, if they did not insult his memory, merely as a

youth of immature talent, as a kind of irreligious Kirke White. Browning, who had printed some of his finest things, and lately *The Blot in the Scutcheon,* was valued in a very small, and apparently narrowing circle. But Bailey's *Festus* had opened the doors to transcendental imagery, and Tennyson's lyrics to the beauty of poetic art. There was, nevertheless, a dominant taste for the purely sentimental, which was clearly and delicately fed by the verses of Richard Monckton Milnes, of Caroline Norton, of John Moultrie; and this laboured to detach into its own pensive province the more fiery and original forms of talent. It had succeeded in winning from Tennyson "Dora" and "The May Queen"; it had threatened to lay down a law that poetry must be emasculated or must cease to exist. These conditions,—a fashionable sentimentality in the ascendant, with a rebellious minority eager for more force and flame,—prepared for each new pretendant a stirring reception from the reviews. *Blackwood,* in its ceaseless war against all that is beautiful and of good report, recognized in the poems of 1844 "the life into which the slime of the Keateses (*sic*) and Shelleys of former times has fecundated." But Leigh Hunt in public and Bulwer Lytton in private praised their promise highly, and their merits introduced their young author to

Miss Barrett, to Robert Browning,[1] to Milnes, and eventually to Tennyson.

But these introductions were preceded by an event which was critical in the career of Coventry Patmore. Scarcely had his first volume of poems issued from the press, than he was shocked by being left abruptly to his own resources. Hitherto, as Mr. Basil Champneys has said, Coventry Patmore "had been quite free from financial pressure: every whim of his had been indulged, and what literary work he had so far done had had no further object than occupation and fame." But P. G. Patmore had been living far beyond his means, had engaged in railway speculation, and now found it prudent towards the close of 1845, in company with his wife, to withdraw suddenly to the Continent. Coventry was in no way prepared for this revolution, nor did his parents so much as bid him farewell. A letter, enclosing a remittance, and announcing that he must not expect

[1] In an unpublished letter of July 31, 1844, Browning wrote: "A very interesting young poet has blushed into bloom this season. I send you his soul's child; the contents were handed and bandied about, and Moxon was told by the knowing ones of the literary turf that 'Patmore was safe to win.' So Moxon relented from his stern purposes of publishing no more verse on his own account, and did publish this." T. Noon Talfourd welcomed the volume of 1844 as "a marvellous instance of genius anticipating time."

another, was the first and only intimation of his father's flight that he received. For the next year he worked from hand to mouth at what odd literary jobs were open to a clever but untrained youth. When the remittance was exhausted, as it soon was, verses, short articles and stray translations brought him in about twenty-five shillings a week. He told me that, at his darkest hour, he found himself reduced to three and sixpence. This sum he regarded as less than nothing, and he therefore expended it on ices. Returning home without a penny, he found an envelope containing payment for an article he had forgotten, and his resources never sank quite so low again. He mentioned the reckless act about the ices with a sort of pride which was very characteristic of him, as though Fate had been cowed by the insolence of his detachment.

It was during these months of poverty and independence that Coventry Patmore formed the most valuable friendship of his early life. Cast forth out of the snug nest in which paternal indulgence had so long protected him, the young poet seems to have faced the dark streets of London, and the horrors of cheap lofty lodgings, with complete courage. He was sustained in this by the companionship of one of broader experience than his own, of maturer years and more commanding

genius. It seems to have been in the winter of 1845, and soon after the flight of his parents to Paris, that Coventry Patmore met Tennyson for the first time. The elder poet had passed through great tribulation, smitten at once in fortune and in health. He had, however, recently been lifted out of these deep waters by the timely grant of a pension of £200, which enabled him to live in modest comfort and even to travel a little. It enabled him to come up sometimes to London from Cheltenham, which was then his head-quarters. He was still unwell and out of spirits; Patmore exaggerated both his age and his disease when he saw him first, taking him to be a man of advanced years, doomed to die in a few months. As a matter of fact, Tennyson was but thirty-six, and his constitution was wiry and robust. He was in a neurotic condition, still being told by the doctor "not to read, not to think." He was already meditating the composition of a poem, half idyl, half satire, which should deal with the question of female discipline and education. In other words, *The Princess* was beginning to take form in his mind.

At this time, and for several years to come, Tennyson was scarcely seen in general company. He had not so completely thrown off the morbid melancholy which had assailed him after the collapse of Dr. Allen's undertakings in 1844 as to be

willing to confront society. Indeed, it is probable that he was physically unfitted for it. Patmore told me that during the early months of their friendship, Tennyson often sank into a sort of gloomy reverie, which would fall upon him, in Keats' phrase—

> Sudden from heaven, like a weeping cloud,

and put a stop to all conversation. While they walked the streets at night in endless perambulation, or while they sat together over a single meal in a suburban tavern, Tennyson's dark eyes would suddenly be set as those of a man who sees a vision, and no further sound would pass his lips, perhaps for an hour. These peculiarities were endured with patience by the younger of the two companions, partly because he was himself inclined to reverie, but particularly because his extreme admiration for Tennyson made him more than indulgent. On this subject some further remarks may be required.

Patmore's attitude to Tennyson in later years ceased to be cordial, and was at length almost defiant. The intimacy had flourished from 1845 to about 1852, when it began to wane; after 1856 there was little evidence of its existence. From this time forward a long estrangement gradually developed between the poets, and with no quarrel

or dispute they fell apart, and never met again. In the later years of his own somewhat arrogant independence, Patmore was vexed to think that he could ever have been subjugated by another mind as he unquestionably was by that of Tennyson. His love of truth forbade him to deny the enslavement, but he did not love to dwell upon it. He said that he had wasted years in following Tennyson about "like a dog," and that he had gained nothing from the sacrifice. He used to declare that Tennyson had never really cared about him, but had merely accepted his companionship to escape from his own thoughts; that Tennyson's conversation had always been egotistical and useless, and that Patmore, in devoting himself to his company, had been worshipping an empty idol. He would tell little innocent anecdotes of Tennyson's simplicity, which he would treat as instances of levity. All this was Patmore at his worst, in the rasping mood which he too often adopted in the reminiscences of his old age. But in happier hours, when he was more genially inspired, he would acknowledge what an unsurpassed advantage it had been to him, as a youth of two and twenty, to be admitted to the confidence of that noble and unique spirit, and he would admit, with generosity, that the great dark man was not always wrapped in the cloak of his silent melancholy, but

that he would with equal suddenness emerge from the cloud, and emit glorious sparkles of thought about God and man, and about the divine art of Poetry.

The friendship with Tennyson was at its height when, in November 1846, through the intervention of Monckton Milnes,—who had been induced by Mrs. Procter to take practical interest in Patmore,—the young poet's strain for daily bread was relieved by his nomination to the post of assistant in the Library of the British Museum. It appears that Milnes also gave him some secretarial employment, and engaged him to help in the arrangement of material in the famous *Life and Letters of Keats* which appeared two years later. At this time Patmore was writing little or no verse, but was engrossed in the technical study of the art of poetry, and his faculties were directed rather to the exercise of prose, in which he had now found a medium in which he could express his ideas with ease.

CHAPTER II

LIFE IN LONDON (1846–1862)

THE excitement caused by the publication of his early poems had no sooner subsided than Patmore began to regard them in an almost contemptuous light of common sense. Escaping from the hot-house air in which he had been educated, brought face to face with the facts of life and forced to look at literature from a healthy standpoint, his earliest discovery was of the weakness of his own overpraised and childish verses. He told Sutton, in the spring of 1847, that he was abashed at the thought of his foolish haste in publishing before his mind was matured, and added that, when all his friends were praising "The River" and "Lilian," and falling into ecstasies over "The Woodman's Daughter," he himself "was conscious from the first of the defective character of the book." There can be no question that the admirable judgment of Tennyson, so happily secured in exchange for the sultry complaisance of the old Cockney circle, had much to do with this healthier condition of his spirit.

Patmore was prevented at this time by a consciousness of failure from recurring to the practice of verse. He was greatly occupied with other interests, literary, moral and material, and he considered that he "wanted the grand essential *leisure* for writing poetry." In saying this he was, no doubt, repeating a formula of Tennyson's, who was in the habit of justifying the aimless, dreamy existence which he himself led, by asserting,—and perhaps with truth,—that a sauntering life of leisure was the only one in which a poet could do justice to his imagination. Patmore was now thrilled and subdued by the genius of Emerson, which was then at the height of its splendour, having quite recently been revealed to a few first English admirers. In his haste to grasp the idealism of Emerson, Patmore threw Coleridge to the winds, and it was not until much later that he returned to the earlier and the subtler master. He says (Feb. 15, 1847): "I am a lover of Ralph Emerson. I have read all his *Essays* at least three times over." This enthusiasm did not, however, blind him to Emerson's inconsistencies and illogicalities, and it is interesting enough to see the youthful Patmore, as by instinct, putting his finger on that want of "the quality of reverence with regard to God," which was to be the rift in the lute of his admiration for the American philoso-

pher. Meanwhile, the conversation of Tennyson and the writings of Emerson are seen to be the intellectual food on which Patmore builds up within his own soul a new man, the man with whom we are in the remainder of this study to be familiar.

His mind was exceedingly disturbed at this period; "the mirror," he wrote, "though not cracked, I hope, is much clouded." We may form an impression of his personal appearance at this time: very tall and thin, his small bright head poised lightly on his shoulders, a look of admirable candour in the broad forehead, prominent mobile lips, and sparkling eyes. These latter, doubtless, as we see them in Brett's admirable drawing of a few years later, were what gave positive charm to the features,—these dark, liquid, vivid eyes, and the silky, rolling hair. Otherwise, to a superficial or unsympathetic observer, the impression may have been of an angular young man, shy, almost saturnine, not ready in speech.

At the house of Laman Blanchard, as is supposed, he met at this time a lady slightly his junior, the orphan daughter of the Reverend Edward Andrews, who had been the Congregationalist minister of Beresford Chapel, Wandsworth. Emily Augusta Andrews had just entered her twenty-fourth year, while Coventry Patmore was

approaching the end of his. The young lady was a transcendentalist; their views about Emerson were identical; on both sides the attraction seems to have been instant and complete. During a May-day walk on the slopes of Hampstead the poet proposed, and was accepted. One of the earliest results of this engagement was to re-awaken in Coventry Patmore's bosom the determination to devote himself seriously to poetical composition. This impulse did not take the form, so common in youthful amorists, of accidental lyrics illustrating moods of adoration and desire, but it quickened in him the determination to write very deliberately one great work of art, which should exemplify and condense the whole system of amatory experience. Immediately after his betrothal, he announced to Emily Andrews, "I have been meditating a poem for you, but I am determined not to give you anything I write unless it is the best thing I have written. Oh, how much the best it ought to be, if it would do justice to its subject."

Between Coventry Patmore, however, and almost all other poets of high distinction in the history of literature, there was to be this remarkable distinction, that while the rest have celebrated the liberty, the freshness and the delirium of love, whether in its physical or in its metaphysical sense,

Coventry Patmore.

From a drawing by J. Brett, R.A., 1855
Reproduced from Basil Champneys' "Coventry Patmore" by kind permission of Messrs. Geo. Bell & Sons

but always rather in the mood of anticipation than of possession, or, if in that of possession, at least in a spirit which feigns to ignore the bonds of custom, Patmore alone is eagerly pleased to hug and gild those bonds. He confesses himself not the poet of passion in the abstract, but of love made a willing captive by the marriage tie. It seems that he long had meditated over this theme, and that he entered the wedded state, not blindly and because there was no escape from it, like most wild lovers, but deliberately and eagerly, as one who could not regard love as possible, or at least as a matter fit for imaginative contemplation, until it was legalized by the Church and the State. From his earliest Protestant days he had unconsciously regarded marriage as a sacrament, and into his poetical commentary there entered, from the first, some dim conception of a ritual. It is important to realize this instinctive fact, before we meet with any of those arguments founded upon religion, which, later on, Patmore employed to justify his view of life.

It seems to me valuable to insist, here at the threshold of Coventry Patmore's life as a poet, on the point that his transcendental adoration of wedded love was originally neither a rule of theology nor an argument of morals, but was a symptom of purely individual lyricism. His no-

tion of Love in Marriage was not inculcated by any priestly or puritanical scruple; it represented no coldness or reserve, no timidity or conventionality. On the contrary, it was a fierce expression of personal instinct. It was the peculiarity of Patmore's mind that the exclusively æsthetic idea of marriage inflamed his imagination with a noble excitement. He saw no difference between marriage and poetry; the one was the subject of the other, the second a necessary interpretation of the first. He prepared for both in the same solemn spirit which inspires the singing boys in the glorious epithalamium of Catullus:—

> Non facilis nobis, æquales, palma parata est;
> Adspicite, innuptæ secum ut meditata requirunt.
> Non frusta meditantur: habent memorabile quod sit.
> Nec mirum: tota penitus quæ mente laborent.

There was no reason, except poverty, which both of them scorned, to keep Coventry Patmore and Emily Andrews apart. On September 11, 1847, they were married at Hampstead, and they went down to Hastings for the honeymoon. More than thirty years later, in writing *Amelia,* Patmore's memory wandered back across so much varied experience to the emotion with which his first wife and he had arrived at Hastings, and how

turning a dim street,
I first beheld the ocean;
There, where the little, bright, surf-breathing town,
That shew'd me first her beauty and the sea,
Gathers its skirts against the gorse-lit down,
And scatters gardens o'er the southern lea.

The married life so felicitously begun was carried through its course with exquisite mutual devotion. But it closed with the death of Emily Patmore in 1862, and after the lapse of more than forty years there are few survivors who recall her with distinctness. Nevertheless, no woman of her period stands out for us with greater definition. We know her to have been of most striking, and at the same time of most pleasing presence. Those who met her for the first time were amazed by her "strange beauty and extreme innocence of countenance and manner." Tennyson, usually a distracted observer, was immediately captivated by her "splendid" appearance combined with "so milk-maid-like an absence of pretension." Ruskin and Carlyle were among her outspoken admirers, and to the young Preraphaelites her face was as that of a Muse. Dignity of manner, more purity and force than actual sweetness, great nonchalance in anxious and embarrassing moments, a sense of the pomp of matronly ceremonial which bordered

on the excessive, combined with some lack of humour,—these seem to be certain of the social characteristics of Emily Patmore when we strip them of the panegyrics of her dazzled admirers. It was admitted that her beauty ceased when she laughed. There were women who complained that she was arrogant; Mrs. Carlyle accused her of trying to look like Woolner's medallion of her. These were necessary shadows in the light of her beautiful presence, for even those whom she repelled admited that she was as radiant as she was pure and good.

Emily Patmore became so completely her husband's Egeria and ideal that it is important for us to know what her appearance was. Fortunately, we have unrivalled opportunity of doing this, since three great artists, at the height of their skill, have preserved her beauty for us in the three spheres of painting, sculpture and poetry. It is given to few women, in the heyday of their youth, to be immortalized by such a trio as John Everett Millais, Thomas Woolner and Robert Browning. The painting by Millais, done in 1851, is a rondo, extremely vivid in colour and finished like one of Holbein's small brilliant portraits at Basle. It represents the subject in complete full face, gazing out of the canvas with great brown eyes under the heavy curtains of her voluminous dark hair, which

is drawn up in the curious Early Victorian way so as to hide the ears. The complexion is transparently hectic, with that dangerous hue on the lips and cheeks which has more of life than life itself should have. The whole candid face and high-poised head breathes an indomitable earnestness and purity. One feels that this finely-coloured creature will be living all for duty and the ideal. We turn to the medallion of Woolner, also a head, and also a rondo. This is a work in delicate low relief, in exact profile. Here, in the absence of Millais' gorgeous colour, we have form insisted on, and we gain information on new points, such as the bold arch of the nose, the resolution of the little rounded chin. The volume of the coiled hair is even more striking here than it was in the front face. In this sculpture, the beauty of hue being abstracted, the sense of positive charm is less than in the painting, but there is added a greater strenuousness of will, and further evidence of what people call "force of character." This medallion seems to have been modelled about the same time as the Millais portrait was painted, namely late in 1851.

Finally, on October 11, 1852, Robert Browning tried his hand at a portrait of the same remarkable model. The lines run thus in their original form:—

If one could have that little head of hers
  Painted upon a background of pale gold
Such as the Tuscan's early art prefers!
  No shade encroaching on the matchless mould
Of those two lips, that should be opening soft
  In the pure profile—not as when she laughs,
For that spoils all—but rather as aloft
  Some hyacinth she loves so leaned its staff's
Burden of honey-coloured studs to kiss
Or capture twixt the lips, apart for this.
  Then her lithe neck, three fingers might surround,
  How it should waver on the pale gold ground
Up to the fruit-shaped perfect chin it lifts!

Such was the external appearance of Emily Patmore in her brilliant youth, standing, in her husband's later words,

> Like a young apple tree, in flush'd array
> Of white and ruddy flower, auroral, gay,

and so for fifteen years of unclouded felicity she trod in the perfection of never-failing freshness the path of wife and mother. She died too soon to have lost the mystery of youthfulness, and in her husband's memory she remained to the last the transcendent type of nuptial beauty. In the very shadow of her death, all he could force himself to think about was the adornments of her character. He was absorbed, at that dark moment, by the circumstances of light itself, brooding not upon the

future but " upon all your patient, persistent goodness, your absolutely flawless life, and all your amiable and innocent graces."

Never, therefore, since the beginning of the world, was a poet more happily situated in relation to the personal bent of his genius than Patmore was in his first married experience. He had formed, as we have seen, a certain exclusively æsthetic notion of marriage as a sacrament. He possessed already the inward and spiritual sense; by an astonishingly good fortune, he now received in a perfectly harmonious wife the outward and visible sign of grace. He came into possession of what Hooker so subtly calls " God's secrets, discovered to none but to His own people." Uplifted by companionship with this stately and kindly creature, daily illuminated by her simplicity, he slowly gained, not merely what seems a very profound insight into the nature of womanhood, but the precise experience which was needed to make him, beyond all his peers, the consecrated laureate of wedded love.

We may therefore, in this brief biography, leave the slight outward incidents of Patmore's career at this time unchronicled and deal exclusively with his history as a poet, working slowly—" in fruition," as he somewhere says, " of the eternal novelty " of ideal marriage—towards as perfect an

expression as he could obtain of those mysteries which are heavenly at once and human. We have seen that his earliest impulse was to compose for Emily Andrews a poem which should be worthy of her, but Emily Andrews had to become Emily Patmore before this particular poem could receive adequate form and substance. The first book of *The Angel in the House* took only six weeks in the writing, but, says the poet, "I had thought of little else for several years before." This statement must be accepted, of course, with reserve. It means that the idea of writing an authoritative poem in praise of the solemnities of marriage was always present during those years, but Patmore was earnestly engaged on other work, in prose as well as in verse. The most important incident in his intellectual life at this time was, however, his intimacy with the Preraphaelites.

The P.R.B., as it called itself, was founded in the autumn of 1848, and early in the following year Thomas Woolner, the sculptor of the Brotherhood, then some twenty-four years of age, sought Patmore's acquaintance. An ardent and impetuous young man, Woolner was interested in verse-writing as well as in modelling. He had accepted with avidity the reforming ideas of his fellows, and like them he was deeply enthusiastic about the art of Tennyson. It would seem that Woolner introduced

into the Preraphaelite circle Patmore's *Poems* of 1844, and somewhat later (September 1849), he had the pleasure of presenting the poet himself, an honoured guest, to D. G. Rossetti, Millais and Holman Hunt. One of the members of the inner Brotherhood has recorded that from "1849 to 1853 we all saw a good deal of Mr. Patmore, and we all looked up to him much for his performances in poetry, his general intellectual insight and maturity, and his knowledge of important persons whom we came to know through him—Tennyson in especial." In 1851 Patmore told Millais that he ought to keep a diary, and the painter began one forthwith. It was Patmore who, in the same year, induced Ruskin to take up the cudgels for the Preraphaelites and to write his famous letter about Millais' pictures to *The Times*. Rossetti speaks with the excitement of a boy of the help which the superior age and prestige of Patmore gave them in carrying out their designs. To Patmore himself, who was amused at finding youths of genius adopting to him the attitude which he adopted to Tennyson, the ardent Preraphaelites seemed "all very simple, pure-minded, ignorant and confident."

The great scheme by which the young friends hoped to impress their views upon a dense and thankless world was now approaching the hour of its evolution. The earliest number of *The Germ:*

Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art, since become so famous and so rare, was issued in the palest pink covers, in January 1850. Among slightly elder persons who favoured and encouraged the project, none was so prominent as Coventry Patmore, who invested it with a motto of perfection, "It is the last rub which polishes the mirror." To the first number he contributed "The Seasons," and to the February number a lyric in dialogue, entitled "Stars and Moon," which was unsigned and which he never claimed. This poem, however, is not merely very characteristic in its style, but it is the earliest specimen existing of what may be called the *Angel in the House* manner. It opens thus:—

> Beneath the stars and summer moon
> A pair of wedded lovers walk.
> Upon the stars and summer moon
> They turn their happy eyes and talk:
> "Those stars, that moon, for me they shine
> With lovely, but no startling light;
> My joy is much, but not as thine,
> A joy that fills the heart like fright,"

and it closes with the wife's exclamation:—

> "Ah, love! we both, with longing deep,
> Love words and actions kind, which are
> More good for life than bread or sleep,
> More beautiful than Moon or Star."

The direct result of Patmore's confabulations with Tennyson on the one hand, and with Rossetti, Millais and Woolner on the other, is seen in the volume called *Tamerton Church-Tower and other Poems* which Pickering published for him in 1853. Nine years had passed since the appearance of his first volume, and much had happened in English literature in the meantime. Tennyson had published *The Princess* in 1847, and *In Memoriam* in 1850; Robert Browning, among many other works, had issued *Dramatic Romances* in 1846 and *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* in 1850; Elizabeth Browning had culminated, for the time being, in her *Casa Guidi Windows* of 1851. Meanwhile, a new poet of the first order—a poet welcomed, by the way, in *The Germ*—had appeared in the person of Matthew Arnold with the *Strayed Reveller* of 1849 and the *Empedocles on Etna* of 1852. These were the talents with which Coventry Patmore was called upon to compete, and their stimulus and audacity were refreshing to his spirit. He kept himself, however, independent of their bias, and on his poetry of this period there is scarcely any trace of contemporary influence. Speaking of a time from 1851 onwards, Dr. Richard Garnett has recorded the subjects of Patmore's intimate discourse. He was glad to converse with younger men—himself no veteran yet of a gravity beyond his years—of " the subordination

of parts of the whole, the necessity of every part of a composition being in keeping with all the others, the equal importance of form with matter, absolute truth to nature, sobriety in simile and metaphor, the wisdom of retaining a reserve of power—those and kindred maxims enforced with an emphasis most salutary to a young hearer just beginning to write in the heyday of the Spasmodic School"—the distracting *Life-Drama* of Alexander Smith, and, still more bewildering, the *Balder* of Sydney Dobell, being, it may be added, the poetic portents of this very dangerous and critical period. Meanwhile the attention of Patmore was being given to the theories and practice of metrical science, and he was examining with great care the laws of verse.

When we turn from the records of his conversation and his reading to the actual pages of the volume of 1853 we are unable to restrain a certain expression of surprise. These pieces are not, at first sight, what we should have expected to receive from so serious and so learned a student of poetic art. The poem which gives its name to the book and occupies its first fifty pages, is a strange sort of Coleridgean improvisation. What we miss in its composition is precisely that literary finish, that last polish given to the mirror, of which we have been hearing so much. "Tamerton Church

Tower" is an experiment of the same class as so many which we have since been made accustomed to by the writers who call themselves "symbolists" or "impressionists." It bears the appearance, which may however be illusory, of having been thrown off with extreme rapidity, and subjected to no revision, by a bard desirous of producing an absolutely fresh impression. Freshness is no doubt what it precisely offered to its earliest admirers, for there were critics who greatly admired "Tamerton Church Tower," and were even dazzled by it. A skilful experiment is always interesting, and novelty is itself a charm. Neither newness nor boldness is wanting to "Tamerton Church Tower," the main fault of which is its extreme slightness. It is really a record of three impressions of travel on the borders of Devonshire and Cornwall. The poet and his friend Frank ride from North Tamerton (a village near Holsworthy) through Tavistock to Plymouth, and are caught in a thunderstorm. They celebrate, in mock-heroics, the charms of Blanche and Bertha, whom they are about to marry. The curtain falls, and rises on the couples already married; they go out in a boat on the Cornish coast, are caught by another thunderstorm, are wrecked, and Mrs. Blanche is drowned. The curtain falls again, and rises on the widower poet riding alone, accompanied by his sad

thoughts, from Plymouth through Tavistock back to Tamerton.

It will be seen that the subject matter of the poem is exiguous in the last degree, and that its attractiveness depends entirely on the treatment. In this the influence of the Preraphaelite ideas is very strongly seen. Patmore writes as the young Millais painted, and sometimes he produces an effect precisely similar—

In love with home, I rose and eyed
  The rainy North ; but there
The distant hill-top, in its pride,
  Adorn'd the brilliant air ;

And as I pass'd from Tavistock
  The scatter'd dwellings white,
The church, the golden weather-cock,
  Were whelm'd in happy light.

Dark rocks shone forth with yellow brooms ;
  And, over orchard walls,
Gleam'd congregated apple-blooms
  In white and ruddy balls.

The children did the good sun greet
  With song and senseless shout ;
The lambs did skip, the dams did bleat,
  In Tavy leapt the trout.

Across a fleeting eastern cloud
  The splendid rainbow sprang,
And larks, invisible and loud,
  Within its zenith sang.

Perhaps the most felicitous quatrains are those which describe "my uncle's daughter Ruth":—

A maid of fullest heart she was;
Her spirit's lovely flame
Nor dazzled nor surprised, because
It always burned the same;

And in the heaven-lit path she trod
Fair was the wife foreshown,
A Mary in the house of God,
A Martha in her own.

This is Wordsworthian, but it is followed by the eminently Patmorean stanza,

Corporeal charms she had; but these
Were tranquil, grave and chaste,
And all too excellent to please
A rash, untutor'd taste.

From the old book of 1844 were restored in 1853 "The River" and "The Woodman's Daughter," which last Millais made the subject of an admirable painting. The metre of these early pieces had been criticized by Tennyson, and in some cases I think that his hand is to be detected in the actual corrections. "The Yew-Berry" is a powerful study of amorous misunderstanding:—

I call this idle history the "Berry of the Yew;"
Because there's nothing sweeter than its husk of scarlet glue,
And nothing half so bitter as its black core bitten through.

In "The Falcon" we have a lyrical rendering of that story of Boccaccio which Tennyson was long afterwards to essay to dramatize. "Eros" is entirely charming; no better specimen of Patmore's early manner can be quoted:

Bright thro' the valley gallops the brooklet;
Over the welkin travels the cloud;
Touch'd by the zephyr, dances the harebell;
Cuckoo sits somewhere, singing so loud;
Swift o'er the meadows glitter the starlings,
Striking their wings all the flock at a stroke;
Under the chestnuts new bees are swarming,
Rising and falling like magical smoke:
Two little children, seeing and hearing,
Hand in hand wander, shout, laugh and sing:
Lo, in their bosoms, wild with the marvel,
Love, like the crocus, is come ere the Spring.
Young men and women, noble and tender,
Yearn for each other, faith truly plight,
Promise to cherish, comfort and honour;
Vow that makes duty one with delight.
Ah, but the glory, found in no story,
Radiance of Eden unquench'd by the Fall,
Few may remember, none may reveal it,
This the First-love, the first love of all.[1]

The main value of the volume of 1853, which must be regarded as tentative and provisional, con-

[1] The quotations from the *Tamerton Church-Tower* volume are all given here from the first edition of 1853. Patmore tinkered his early verses, and not always to their advantage.

sisted in its fine realism, in its determination to see natural objects through eyes that were clear and unclouded, and in its consistent study of nuptial love, more and more distinctly concentrated on its sacramental aspect. It is therefore not difficult to admit that the most important numbers in the whole of the *Tamerton Church-Tower* collection were "Honoria: Ladies' Praise" and "Felix: Love's Apology," where were presented fragments of the great poem, consecrated to marriage, which Patmore had for so many years had under consideration. It is interesting to observe that, after Tennyson, Carlyle seems to have been the first to give full approbation to Coventry Patmore's new departure in emotional poetry. He found (June 7, 1853) in the *Tamerton Church-Tower* volume "a great deal of fine poetic light, and many excellent elements of valuable human faculty." Patmore seems to have chaffed him delicately on his supposed dislike of the vehicle of verse; Carlyle, surprisingly amenable, recommends the poet to "go on, and prosper, in what vehicle *you* find, after due thought, to be the likeliest for you." Ruskin thought the poems "a little too like Tennyson to attract attention as they should." The Brownings, "with old admiration for your genius" still unabated, prayed for some more unmistakable manifestation of it. There was a general feeling that

the volume of 1853 was experimental, and that the poet had something better up his sleeve.

Such was indeed the fact, and the time was now fast approaching when he would submit to the world a first instalment, at least, of the masterpiece which he had been so long preparing. The evidence as to the precise date at which the great poem was begun is conflicting; Patmore himself, long afterwards, at different times, made vague and yet positive statements which cannot be brought into line with one another. He said that "the first book of the *Angel in the House* took only six weeks in the writing, though I had thought of little else for several years before." This is partly confirmed by his own remarkable confession in verse, which cannot be too attentively noted. He wrote:—

> Not careless of the gift of song,
> Nor out of love with noble fame,
> I, meditating much and long
> What I should sing, how win a name,
> Considering well what theme unsung,
> What reason worth the cost of rhyme,
> Remains to loose the poet's tongue
> In these last days, the dregs of time,
> Learn that to me, though born so late,
> There does, beyond desert, befall
> (May my great fortune make me great!)
> The first of themes, sung last of all.

In green and undiscovered ground,
Yet near where many others sing,
I have the very well-head found,
Whence gushes the Pierian Spring.

Here we have almost exactly the attitude of La Bruyère in his famous opening sentence of the *Caractères*,—" Tout est dit, et l'on vient trop tard depuis plus de mille ans qu'il y a des hommes, et qui pensent,"—followed by the instant proof that to the artist practically nothing has yet been said of what is veritably best. It is plain that after reflecting long Patmore came to the conclusion he could take the primal interests of mankind and so treat them as to make them appear new, that he might so celebrate Nuptial Love as to make even married lovers feel that they had never loved before. It seems to me that immediately after his marriage in 1847 he made spasmodic efforts to start his poem, but only contrived, at that time, to produce the " few astonishing lines " which he read in 1849 to Rossetti, Woolner and Millais. The year 1850 appears to mark the date of the practical commencement of *The Angel in the House*. On March 21 of that year, Rossetti writes:—

" [Patmore] has been occupied the last month with his poem on Marriage, of which, however, he has not meanwhile written a line; but, having

meditated the matter, is now about to do so. He expresses himself quite confident of being able to keep it up at the same pitch as the few astonishing lines he has yet written."

The poetical faculty of Coventry Patmore was singularly fluctuating. He was not one of those poets who can compose with comparative regularity, and be confident of producing a fair number of lines every year. His vein was extremely intermittent, and if for short periods his verse would flow, as Milton's did, " with a certain impetus and *oestrus*," there were months and even years when he was unable to make a single line. But it was an admirable quality in his nature that he could be perfectly patient. He said to me, near the close of his career, that he was thankful to know that he had never, from anxiety or vanity, spurred an unwilling Pegasus. So now, at the threshold of his great endeavour, he felt no discouragement at the delay in its performance; he had, again like Milton, " an inward prompting which grew daily upon him, that by labour and intent study he might perhaps leave something so written to after times, as they should not willingly let it die." And in this persuasion, and with this faith, he was in no hurry; he could afford to be " long choosing " and " beginning late."

What Patmore's conception of his subject and

his method of treating it were, have never been stated in clearer terms than by Aubrey de Vere in some recollections which he wrote down at the request of Mr. Basil Champneys:—

"[Patmore] called upon me one day in a state of unusual excitement and animation. Its cause he did not care to conceal. There was, he assured me, one particular theme for Poetry, the more serious importance of which had been singularly missed by most poets of all countries, frequently as they had taken its name in vain. That theme was Love: not a mere caprice of fancy, or Love as, at best, a mere imaginative Passion—but Love in the deeper and softer sense of the word. The Syren woman had been often sung. . . . But that Love in which, as he affirmed, all the Loves centre, and that Woman who is the rightful sustainer of them all, the Inspiration of Youth, and the Consolation of Age, that Love and that Woman, he asserted, had seldom been sung sincerely and effectually. He had himself long since selected that theme as the chief one of his poetry, but, often as he had made the attempt, it had never succeeded to his judgment. . . . He had made one attempt more and this time a successful one. . . . His poem was already nearly finished."

Aubrey de Vere continues: "In a few weeks more *The Angel in the House* appeared," but this

is, I think, an error of memory. From other documents, I gather that Patmore's visit to him, and the ensuing conversation, took place in the summer of 1850, whereas the earliest part of the poem appeared in 1854. The explanation of this delay seems to be that although *The Betrothal,* and perhaps *The Espousals,* were practically sketched out in 1850, their finish did not satisfy a taste which was rapidly becoming fastidious. Tennyson objected, and not without reason, to the roughness of some of the stanzas. Meanwhile Patmore's inspiration flagged again, and it was not until 1853 that he seems to have contrived to fill up the gaps in his structure, and give the whole text its needful polish. Tennyson was satisfied at last, and said of *The Betrothal,* "You have begun an immortal poem, and, if I am no false prophet, it will not be long in winning its way into the hearts of the people." Patmore appears to have been a little over-excited at the immediate prospect of immortality. He told D. G. Rossetti that he meant to make *The Angel in the House* bigger than the *Divina Commedia.* He hesitated to make the plunge into publicity, and sent proof-sheets of the first book beforehand to his friends for their final censure. It was thus that Tennyson read *The Betrothal,* "sitting on a cliff close to the sea" in the Isle of Wight, in the early summer of 1854, and

told Aubrey de Vere, as an unpublished letter from the latter informs Patmore, that the poem, "when finished, will add one more to the small list of Great Poems." De Vere adds, on his own account, "it is long since I read anything so beautiful."

The very moment when his son was preparing to give the public a foretaste of his poem was unluckily chosen by Peter George Patmore for publishing a volume of not dull indeed, but unmannerly and displeasing reminiscences, entitled *My Friends and Acquaintances.* Nothing could have been more ill-timed, for the press rang with denunciation of the name of Patmore. The poet determined to appear under a pseudonym, and had actually printed a title-page with the name C. K. Dighton upon it, when he was dissuaded by the common sense of Rossetti from such a piece of mystification. The same eminently practical friend (always so wise when another than himself was the object of his interest) induced Patmore to suppress "a marvellous note at the end, accounting for some part of the poem being taken out of his former book by some story of a butterman and a piece of waste paper." At last, in October 1854, was published by J. W. Parker & Son, an anonymous volume of 191 pages, entitled *The Angel in the House: The Betrothal.* It may be said, at once, although it takes us somewhat out of our

biographical sequence, that this was followed in 1856 by *The Espousals*, a volume of not quite so many pages. A precious volume consisting of copies of the 1854 and 1856 instalments of *The Angel in the House* as altered and re-arranged by the author for the second edition of his united work, was presented to me by Patmore in 1884. This valuable relic lies before me as I write, and the alterations, all in the poet's beautiful handwriting, are so very numerous that, in many cases, for pages together, the MS. entries exceed the print in bulk. In later reissues Patmore was incessantly revising and remoulding the text, so that to form a variorum edition of *The Angel in the House* would be a task before which the boldest bibliographer might shrink. But the main radical changes were made in 1857, and since then the poem has been, in essential form, what it is to-day.

One change which must strike every reader who studies the abundant alterations made between 1854 and 1857, is a technical, or rather a rhythmical, one. Tennyson had not ceased to upbraid Patmore with his want of smoothness; he had said that some of his lines seemed "hammered up out of old nail-heads." When Patmore, as a lad of seventeen, began to write verses, he possessed, as we have had occasion to note, a most defective ear. How far the extraordinary eccentricities which mar

his volume of 1844 were wilful or accidental we are hardly in a position to decide, but to read many of those early lyrics is like riding down a frozen lane in a springless cart. He had his peculiar theories of stress and accentuation, but I think, also, that he had much in the Art of Poetry to learn. When he came to compose *The Betrothal* in 1850, the lesson was already half prepared, and we are safe in attributing the increase in smoothness and felicity to the close companionship with Tennyson which he had been enjoying. But it was not until a still later date that he gave his mind closely, for the first time, to the study of English metrical law, and the proofs of the result lie scattered broadcast over the pages of his MS. One example will show this as well as a hundred. In 1854 he had printed:—

> For thus I think, if any I see
> Who falls short of my high desire,

but this could not satisfy the fastidiousness of 1857, and it was changed to:—

> For thus I think, if one I see
> Who disappoints my high desire.

As every one knows, *The Angel in the House* is written in a uniform measure of alternate rhyming eights, the commonest metre for humble hymns and ballads that has ever been invented.

Patmore was often attacked by the critics for using this humdrum, jigging measure, and he was once challenged to say why he had chosen it. He replied that he did so of set purpose, partly because at that particular time the Brownings and even Tennyson, with the Spasmodists in their wake, were diverging into the most quaint and extravagant forms, and he wished to call the public back to simplicity; but partly also because it was a swift and jocund measure, full of laughter and gaiety, suitable, not to pathetic themes, but to a song of chaste love and fortunate marriage. No doubt there is truth in this, and the simplicity of Patmore's measure pleases us still while the fantastic variety of his friend Woolner in *My Beautiful Lady* (1863), a poem which once threatened to be a serious rival to Patmore's, has long ago become a weariness. That Patmore, as he used hotly to aver, did not neglect the polishing and fashioning of his facile metre, a comparison of the different texts amply proves.

But the alterations which he made were of a far more radical kind than were involved in mere rhythmical correction. He cancelled long passages, added new ones, removed stanzas from one part of the structure to another, and almost in every case these bold and essential changes were improvements. There can be no question, and the point

is one of great interest in the career of a poet, that in 1857 Patmore was in enjoyment of a new flush of creative talent. There is therefore a peculiar interest in what he wrote at that time, and I do not scruple to print here one or two fragments which occur in the MS., but which I cannot discover were then or have ever since been printed. What whim constrained the poet finally to exclude this exquisite little "epigram" with which he had closed the seventh canto of his work?—

"Rejoice evermore!"

I err'd this day, O Lord, and am
  Not worthy to be called Thy son;
But if Thy will be, heavenly Lamb,
  That I rejoice, Thy will be done!
Death I deserve; I am yet in life;
  Ill is my wage, Thou pay'st me good;
These are my children, this my wife,
  I feel the Spring, I taste my food.
Thy love exceeds, then, all my blame.
  O grant me, since Thou grantest these,
Grace to put "Hallow'd be Thy name"
  Before "Forgive my trespasses."

Still less reason does there seem to have been for ultimately rejecting "Love of Loves":—

"The man seeks first to please his wife,"
  Declares, but not complains, Saint Paul;
And other loves have little life
  When she's not loved the most of all.

We cannot weigh or measure love,
And this excess, assure you well,
If sinful, is a sin whereof
Only the best are capable.

The close of the following brilliant and highly characteristic section appears only in the original draft of the poem. Mr. Basil Champneys thinks that the excision of this passage points to the fact that the sense of it was not in accordance with Roman doctrine. Mr. Champneys takes occasion to give an admirable definition of Patmore's peculiar view that "marriage, in its fullest fruition, exalts rather than compromises essential purity, so long as the partners to it preserved a sense of its sacramental character, of its never-failing freshness and mystery." This is unquestionably true, but this was Patmore's creed after as well as before his conversion, and to the end of his life. The conversion, moreover, took place in 1864, while this passage was cancelled in 1857. We must look, I think, for some other reason, probably a purely literary instinct or caprice, for the disappearance of these beautiful lines. As the poet composed them, they should have come between "Love and Honour" and "Valour Misdirected":—

The Vestal Fire.

Virgins are they, before the Lord,
Whose hearts are pure; "the vestal fire
Is not," so runs the Poet's word,
"By marriage quenched, but flames the higher";

Warm, living is the praise thereof;
And wedded lives, which not belie
The honourable heart of love,
Are fountains of virginity.

One more epigram is far too delightful in be lost:—

NOTA BENE.

Wouldst thou my verse to thee should prove
How sweet love is? When all is read,
Add "In divinity and love
What's worth the saying can't be said."

There is plenty of evidence of the great seriousness with which Patmore composed and revised all portions of *The Angel in the House*. He did not regard it as a mere work of entertainment, or even as an artistic experiment, but as a task of deep social and moral importance which he was called upon to fulfil. This sense of the gravity of his mission took, in 1854, a form which he proceeded immediately to reject, no doubt because the expression of his feeling, though natural to himself, might strike a reader as arrogant. The canto now called "The Friends" was originally intended to begin with these lines:—

May these my songs inaugurate
The day of a new chivalry,
Which shall not feel the mortal fate
Of fashion, chance or phantasy.

> The ditties of the knightly time,
> The deep-conceiving dreams of youth,
> With sweet corroboration chime,
> And I believe that love's the truth.

The expression here might not be judicious from the lips of a very young writer, but it was essentially justified. The curates and the old maids who were presently to buy the poems of Patmore as the sweetest, safest sugar-plums of the sheltered intellectual life, were themselves responsible for the view they took of *The Angel in the House*. They imagined the grim and rather sinister author to be a kind of sportive lambkin, with his tail tied in bows of blue riband. But Patmore was a man of the highest seriousness; he aimed at nothing less than an exposition of the divine mystery of wedlock, and no reader should consider that he has fathomed, or even dipped into, the real subject of the poem, until he has mastered the wonderful sections at the close, called "The Wedding" and "The Amaranth." Here the ideal of nuptial love is described and expatiated upon, as perhaps by no other modern poet, with the purity of a saint and the passion of a flaming lover.

In the original draft, Vaughan, the supposed writer of the poem, and his wife, confess that they expect it to be cruelly handled by the reviewers, but anticipate the consolation of a warm

letter of praise from the Laureate. Of this latter satisfaction, they were at least certain; we have seen that since 1846 Tennyson had been the nearest and the most admired of Patmore's friends, and the influence of his comments and encouragements is certainly marked in the texture of *The Angel in the House.* But Patmore had good reason to dread the cruelties of the professional critics. His earlier volumes had received abuse of a kind such as we can now hardly conceive of. *Blackwood's Magazine,* which had sent Keats "back to his gallipots," had learned no lesson from the passage of years; it had called Patmore's verses slime, "the spawn of frogs," and "the ultimate terminus of poetical degradation." It is only fair to say that, before his death, Professor Wilson apologized for the virulence of this disgusting article. Other reviews, without being so offensive as this, had been very disagreeable. In those days a young poet had to fight for his place, and the more original he was, the harder was the struggle. On the whole, however, the reception of *The Angel in the House* was not unkind. The *Athenæum,* it is true, published a very cruel article, which began as follows:—

"The gentle reader we apprize That this new Angel in the House Contains a tale not very wise About a Person and a Spouse. The author, gentle

as a lamb, Has managèd his rhymes to fit, And haply fancies he has writ Another *In Memoriam*."

If this is read aloud, it will be seen to be a not uningenious parody of the measure of the original. The whole review was composed in this form, and was the work of a then notorious musical and literary critic, Henry Fothergill Chorley.

The breaking out of the Indian Mutiny caused the poet to suspend for a year the publication of the revised and united *Angel in the House*. But in 1858, after so many sorrows and such a shedding of the nation's best blood in Russia and in India, the public mind in England was eager for domesticity and rest. The tender purity of Patmore's poem, its direct appeal to the primitive emotions of the heart, precisely suited English feeling. *The Angel in the House* began to sell in hundreds, then in thousands, and it soon became the most popular poem of the day.

The author proceeded to expand it. In 1860 he published *Faithful for Ever*, in which Frederick Graham, the rejected suitor of the Angel, marries a woman not specially suited to him, but one who, by dint of worthiness of soul and a striving after higher things, becomes a helpmeet in the best sense. It cannot be said that this theme lends itself well to poetry, and the form Patmore now adopted, that of letters in octo-

syllabic rhyme passing between the characters, was ill adapted to his purpose. *Faithful for Ever* was soon melted into its successor, *The Victories of Love,* and it is now by no means easy to detach it from the general texture of the whole. All this time the health of Emily Patmore had been steadily undermined by consumption. On July 5, 1862, she passed away, and the Angel in the House was buried in Hendon churchyard. Whether or not the final section of his poem, *The Victories of Love,* in which the pathetic parting of married lovers is dwelt upon with exquisite tenderness, was written before the death of Emily Patmore, appears to be doubtful, but the dates suggest that it was largely composed in premonition of that event. Without dwelling on so private and so delicate a subject, there can be no indiscretion now in saying that certain of the most poignant odes in *Unknown Eros* embalm memories and episodes of this long-drawn, sad farewell. *The Victories of Love* was composed in a vein more resigned if not less ardent, and in the sermon near the close of it Patmore distinctly prophesied of those psychological mysteries to which, under the influence of his second marriage, his intellect was to submit itself so freely.

It is worth noting that *The Victories of Love* appeared, in 1862, in successive numbers of *Mac-*

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millan's Magazine, where they must have greatly surprised the readers of that periodical, utterly unaccustomed to so strange a sort of serial. But I am told by Dr. Garnett that the offer of £100 for this use in the magazine was gladly accepted by Patmore, who was somewhat overborne by the expenses of his wife's long illness. In the next year *The Victories of Love* appeared as a small volume, and in course of time, having long swallowed up *Faithful for Ever,* it has itself been absorbed in the general text of *The Angel in the House.*

CHAPTER III

"THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE"

AMONG the poets of the Preraphaelite school, with whom Patmore was associated when he was writing *The Angel in the House,* freshness of impression to the eye and ear was aimed at by a great solicitude for ingenuous verse-effects. In the case of D. G. Rossetti the metrical simplicity of poems like "The Blessed Damozel" and "Jenny" is found contrasted with delicate inventions such as we meet with in "Love's Nocturn" and "First Love Remembered." Morris had cultivated *terza rima* in "The Defence of Guinevere," curious choral forms of a mediæval kind in "The Chapel in Lyoness," and in "Rapunzel," and strange arrangement of rhymes in his refrained ballads. In the poem which is almost the only direct attempt to rival *The Angel in the House,* Woolner's *My Beautiful Lady,* each canto is composed in a different metre, and some of the stanzaic forms are as elaborate and artificial as those used in the seventeenth century by the school of George Herbert. In the face of this general tendency to consider metrical variety and originality essential, we have

seen that Patmore composed his great work in a measure of the most humdrum simplicity. The "modest and unpretentious" metre which he chose was that of the rhymed octosyllabic quatrain.

In advancing years, Patmore became very sensitive to criticism of the vehicle which he had adopted. He resented extremely the charge which was occasionally brought against the movement of *The Angel in the House* that it was "garrulous" and "prattling." He stated in the strongest terms that it was with deliberation, and in order to secure certain effects which thereby he did secure, that he had chosen what he thought a gay and jocund measure, peculiarly well adapted to celebrate the joys of marriage. He thought the exaggerations of metrical display, to which our romantic poets have constantly been prone, vulgar and ugly, and the employment of them likely to disgust the reader with a theme of any inherent delicacy. In his *Essay on English Metrical Law*, which was printed in 1856, he adroitly justifies the use which he had just been making of the common eight-syllable quatrain by describing it as "a measure particularly recommended by the early critics, and continually chosen by poets in all times, for erotic poetry, on account of its joyous air." These statements, as well as the observation that it owes its "unusual rapidity of movement" to the fact that

it is acatalectic, or existing in a state of breathless continuity, may be contested, and were at once challenged by Tennyson. But the interesting point is the proof this passage gives us of the mode in which Patmore regarded the metre which he had chosen.

He was alive to the danger of losing himself in a narrative which, however momentous to himself, might seem vapid and trivial to his readers. As a matter of fact, the actual story of *The Angel in the House* is of a nature similar to those told in exactly contemporary novels, such as *Barchester Towers* and *The Daisy Chain*. The first thing it was essential for Patmore to do was to replace an element of realistic entertainment, in the supply of which he could not hope to compete with Miss Yonge and Anthony Trollope, by delicate ingenuities of art and by a strain of consistent philosophy. The structure of *The Angel in the House* is ingenious, and far more elaborate than the casual reader suspects. The poem proper is fronted by a Prologue, and is divided into two books, each book containing twelve cantos, each canto being subdivided into a prelude, a segment of narrative, and certain epigrams or epilogues which are independent of the story. It must be remembered that we possess but a portion of the work, which in the early fifties was, as D. G. Rossetti reports, in-

tended to be bigger than the *Divina Commedia.* Had Patmore carried out this scheme, the recurrence of motifs throughout would have been still more marked than it is, and the concinnity of the poem as a work of art still more apparent. The " preludes " would then have been seen to form a poem in themselves, a philosophical setting, of which faith transfigured in love was the theme and the inspiration.

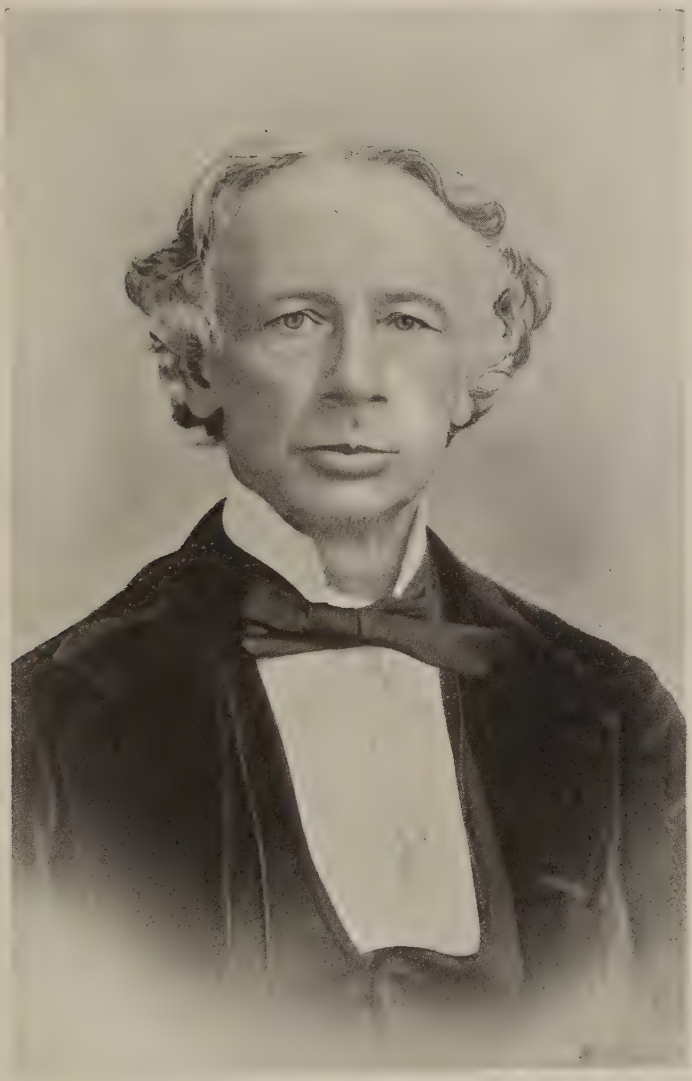
The subject of *The Angel in the House* was one which was generally misunderstood even by those who fell most directly under its charm. The poem was, primarily and obviously, a breviary for lovers, and in this capacity no subtlety was needed to comprehend it. It pleased all women and many men, and those who traced in it the echo of their own sentiments did not trouble themselves to inquire whether the poet had any deeper meaning than appeared upon the surface of his work. Youths and maidens liked to recognize their own flushed and dreamy faces reflected upon a mirror so flattering and so limpid. Such readers saw that the poem was simple, and they rejoiced in its simplicity without troubling themselves to realize that the writer of it was complicated. The effect of the poem on a very large number of persons who had not up to that time been captured by the spell of poetry was very extraordinary. *The Angel in the*

House performed a work of imaginative conciliation; it brought into the fold of lovers of literature a vast number of young men and women who had hitherto been utterly recalcitrant to the charm of verse. These readers discovered that the instincts which they had experienced in silence, with an abashed acquiescence in the conviction that they could never be put into words, were here actually interpreted in language of great sweetness and melody, and treated as matters of high public importance.

The subject of Patmore's poem was singularly original. The general tendency of the time was to a certain lawlessness in the treatment of sexual passion. A wholesome reaction against the timid and commonplace concealment of the enormous part that sex takes in the whole comity of man was expressing itself more or less rebelliously, with more or less juvenile exaggeration. A great poet, the contemporary of Patmore, had gone so far as to denounce, with scorn and hatred, those who wish *aux choses de l'amour mêler l'honnêteté*. There would seem to be absolutely nothing in common between Baudelaire and the English poet who more than any other has celebrated *l'honnêteté* in love; but there is this, their intense preoccupation with the problem of sex. The illustrious Frenchman, to use a familiar image, ap-

proached the subject as the poacher, Patmore as the gamekeeper, and the great originality of the latter consists in the boldness with which he has accepted marriage, which almost all other poets had treated as either the enemy or the conclusion of love, as being its very object and summit. What is not instantly observed is that to Patmore, within the pale of the mysterious sacrament of marriage, no less psychological ingenuity is possible than to Baudelaire outside it. A very curious instance of this freedom is to be found in the sympathy which Patmore felt for the boudoir-novelists of the eighteenth century. I recollect, in 1881, a most interesting conversation with him about *Les Matines de Cythère* of Crébillon *fils,* in the course of which he maintained, paradoxically, that such books were not corrupt though they might be dangerous, that they contained most valuable analysis of the human heart, and that their sentimental refinements were a tribute to the species of occult divinity of which their excesses were powerless to deprive their theme.

The plan of *The Angel in the House* supposed that a modern poet, named Vaughan, while walking through the fields with his wife on the eighth anniversary of their wedding-day, divulged to her the secret that he intended to compose a poem of a perfectly new class.



Coventry Patmore.

From a photograph by G. Bradshaw, 1886

The wife, not versed in the history of literature, supposes this to be either the life of King Arthur or the Fall of Jerusalem, but Vaughan corrects her:—

> Neither: your gentle self, my wife,
> And love, that grows from one to all.

He is a slow writer, however, and it is not until a year later that he hands her, on their ninth wedding-day, "his leisure's labour 'Book the First.'" This external myth, which recurs at distant intervals, was doubtless designed to prevent, what always annoyed Patmore by its ineptitude, the identification of himself and his first wife with the hero and heroine of the poem. But before we start the story, we have in the preludes to the "Cathedral Close," the key-note struck of the theme and temper of what is to follow:—

> Thou Primal Love, who grantest wings
> And voices to the woodland birds,
> Grant me the power of saying things
> Too simple and too sweet for words . . .
> The richest realm of all the earth
> Is counted still a heathen land:
> Lo! I, like Joshua, now go forth
> To give it into Israel's hand.

Leaving us still somewhat uncertain as to the actual latitude and longitude of this mysterious

realm, the poet pauses no longer but starts his story: In the Close of Sarum, Dean Churchill, a widower, brings up in a stately and evangelical decorum, three lovely daughters, Honoria, Mildred and Mary. When Vaughan, still "a rude boy," had been intimate with the family, six years before, the girls were prigs and prudes. He sees them again, and is overwhelmed by the charm of their mellowing graces. His age, his temperament, his opportunity, alike combine to concentrate all his nature on the pursuit of feminine beauty, and the poet well paints the egotism of the instinctive lover, who could adore all the sisters, or any one of the three, being at first blindly and foolishly subdued to the general fascination of them all. In this condition, delicately polygamous and universally enflamed, he pours forth a sort of canticle which is one of the most subtly original and at the same time one of the most felicitous passages in the whole of Patmore's poetry. It must be quoted in its entirety:—

Whene'er I come where ladies are,
  How sad soever I was before,
Though like a ship frost-bound and far
  Withheld in ice from the ocean's roar,
Third-winter'd in that dreadful dock,
  With stiffen'd cordage, sails decay'd,
And crew that care for calm and shock
  Alike, too dull to be dismay'd,

Yet, if I come where ladies are,
How sad soever I was before,
Then is my sadness banish'd far,
And I am like that ship no more;
Or, like that ship if the ice-field splits,
Burst by the sudden polar Spring,
And all thank God for their warming wits,
And kiss each other and dance and sing,
And hoist fresh sails, that make the breeze
Blow them along the liquid sea,
Out of the North, where life did freeze,
Into the haven where they would be.

(The reader will not fail to notice the anapæstic movements introduced here into the humdrum measure, with the symbolic purpose of illustrating the pulse and glow of life in its new vague impulse.) Vaughan is now in that very dangerous state in which the heart, having got the habit of loving, is ready to be set on fire by every spark of beauty. Fortunately, the clouds of roseate radiance promptly clear away, and he sees Honoria, like Venus in the boscages of Ida, obviously and unquestionably sweeter than her sisters. There is no sign, for a while, that his suit is to be encouraged, and he dies a thousand deaths of fantastic agony in his impatience. Here Patmore is extremely skilful in showing what the effect of love is upon the young man's nature. This new-born passion, concentrated at last in timid worship upon

Honoria, tends to the mysterious exaltation of his whole being:—

> His merits in her presence grow,
> To match the promise in her eyes,
> And round her happy footsteps blow
> The authentic airs of Paradise.

Her presence, in short, and the complex emotions which she awakens in him, reveal to him his own power to feel, his very heart, and even the material amplitude of the universe. In this exaltation, the incongruities of social existence fade away to nothingness; they are burned up in the fire of feeling; and the same transcendent rapture clothes the artifice of life at the Close of Sarum as to a different class of lover covers the abandonment of savage womanhood on the reefs of Tahiti or in the woodlands of Ceylon. The accidents of civilized life—a respectable house, elegant clothes, the amenities of a reformed (and endowed) religion, all the comfortable and absurd prose of contemporary middle-class felicity—are transfigured by the delirium of the sexual instinct. The cleverness of Patmore in dwelling upon all this, which every one had vaguely felt, but which no one had ever been willing to record, is positively astonishing. He paints the flush and rainbow of young love in all its exquisite fatuity, yet without slipping into

the ridiculous. What, for instance, could be more ingenious than Vaughan's philosophical rhapsody about Clothes? The young Churchill ladies appear freshly dressed for an archery party. We see them in our mind's eye, with the bright silks drawn over enormous crinolines, revealing the short lilac gloves, and the neat balmorals below. Nothing, it would seem, could be more respectable, and nothing more odious to the Muses. Nothing less amenable to the sway of Eros, that great god, naked and terrible. There are types and images of beauty, justified by the tradition of poetry and painting, which demand, surely, that the lover should avert his eyes from these ballooning crinolines?

No! that eclecticism will suffice for literature and art, but life is differently constituted. The attraction of pure sexual instinct cuts through all such conventions, and Vaughan learns, as the most delicate poet of antiquity learned before him, *nescit amor priscis cedere imaginibus.* The Churchill ladies start in all their modest finery for the garden-party, and this is how their dresses are transfigured:—

> Boon Nature to the woman bows;
> She walks in earth's whole glory clad,
> And, chiefest for herself of shows,
> All others help her, and are glad:

No splendour 'neath the sky's proud dome
  But serves for her familiar wear;
The far-fetch'd diamond finds its home
  Flashing and smouldering in her hair;
For her the seas their pearls reveal;
  Art and strange lands her pomp supply
With purple, chrome and cochineal,
  Ochre, and lapis lazuli;
The worm its golden woof presents;
  Whatever runs, flies, dives or delves,
All doff for her their ornaments
  Which suit her better than themselves;
And all, by this their power to give,
  Proving her right to take, proclaim
Her beauty's clear prerogative
  To profit so by Eden's blame.

The story, if story it can be called, now pursues its innocuous course. Vaughan is of good birth, sufficient wealth and agreeable features; the match is one in which the widowed Dean has no excuse for delaying to acquiesce. The course of love flows as smoothly as the sleepy river of Avon among its water-lilies. The young man suffers a few suitable and necessary delays, during the course of which he abandons himself to agonies of fear, and then is invited, at his own request, to discuss some "business," to the Deanery to dinner. The ladies rise and leave to their "tasteless wine" the elder and the younger gentleman. The Dean

talks about the British Association, about antiquities at Abury:—

> Last,
> He hoped the business was not bad
> I came about: then the wine pass'd.
> A full glass prefaced my reply:
> I loved his daughter, Honor; I told
> My estates and prospects; might I try
> To win her? At my words so bold
> My sick heart sank.

Ah! *si jeunesse savait!* the Dean, only too delighted, gives his glad consent at once. It was these narrative graces, so curiously in the exact taste of the time, which made *The Angel in the House* a direct rival to the guileless domestic romances of 1850.

Patmore was highly sensitive to the criticism which was sometimes directed to this portion of his work. Such lines as:—

> "Look, is not this a pretty shawl,
> Aunt's parting gift?" "She's always kind."
> "The new wing spoils Sir John's old Hall;
> You'll see it, if you pull the blind,"

or, still worse, from *The Victories of Love*—

> "Also, I thank you for the frocks
> And shoes for baby. I (D.V.)
> Shall wean him soon,"

represented a strong desire on the poet's part to eschew all rhetoric, and to produce a perfectly

faithful impression. In some cases, happier than these, he succeeds, but too often he fails to be distinguished. It is extremely difficult to say where success ends and failure abruptly begins in these cases. The instinct for style is a delicate thing, and it sometimes preserves Robert Browning while it abandons Elizabeth Barrett, or takes Tennyson smoothly over reefs upon which Patmore strikes. The fact remains that the story of *The Angel in the House*, which was that which attracted to it at first tens of thousands of readers who cared little for poetry, is now to be neglected. What arrests our attention is the lyrical psychology of the "preludes" and epilogues which form the setting of each canto.

The philosophical interest of the poem becomes lively at the point where an ordinary love-tale becomes dull, namely, when the lover is accepted. At this juncture the poet draws aside for a moment to make a personal confession:—

> How vilely 'twere to misdeserve
> The poet's gift of perfect speech,
> In song to try, with trembling nerve,
> The limits of its utmost reach,
> Only to sound the wretched praise
> Of what to-morrow shall not be;
> So mocking with immortal bays
> The cross-bones of mortality!
> I do not thus.

And in his close study of enchanted instinct, he does not forget that this passion of betrothal is the preparation for a great and holy sacrament. What thrills the lover with so bewildering a sweetness that he seems translated into a new sphere, is the ecstasy of feeling that he loves on earth as the blessed love in heaven. In describing the strange violence of this illusion, which is purely a matter of sexual instinct at base, but which suggestion dyes with all the colours of spiritual romance, Patmore attains a rare precision of insight. Shakespeare has scarcely surpassed this close and sympathetic observation of that mystery of erotic infatuation which invades and overwhelms the spirit of a pure and ardent inamorato—

How strange a thing a lover seems
  To animals that do not love!
Lo! where he walks and talks in dreams,
  And flouts us with his Lady's glove;
How foreign is the garb he wears;
  And how his great devotion mocks
Our poor propriety and scares
  The undevout with paradox!
His soul, through scorn of worldly care,
  And great extremes of sweet and gall,
And musing much on all that's fair,
  Grows witty and fantastical . . .
He blames her, though she has no fault,
  Except the folly to be his;
He worships her, the more to exalt
  The profanation of a kiss;

Health's his disease ; he's never well
But when his paleness shames her rose ;
His faith's a rock-built citadel,
Its sign a flag that each way blows ;
His o'er-fed fancy frets and fumes ;
And Love, in him, is fierce, like Hate
And ruffles its ambrosial plumes
Against the bars of time and fate.

The harlequin passion which invades him occupies every corner of his heart and distracts all the powers of his will. It upsets every rule of logic, and makes it a postulate that in love the part is greater than the whole. The entire world passes into vagueness and dimness, and the crystal atmosphere in which the beloved object seems to walk concentrates upon itself all the radiance and all the reality of the universe. In this condition, the lover walks in a trance and is so far removed from the moods and interests of other human beings that it is only by a sort of theatrical effort that he pursues his mortal course from day to day, as an actor not as a real protagonist in life. Cowley, another very learned lover, had observed this lunacy of the infatuated, and in a lucid moment had cried out:—

I wonder what the Grave and Wise
Think of all us that love !
Whether our pretty Fooleries
Their Mirth or Anger move ;
They understand not Breath, that Words do want ;
Our Sighs to them are insignificant.

But Patmore does not consent, even in irony, to call the mysterious movements of the lover "fooleries." He looks upon them as inevitable symptoms of the vast change which is taking place, and a great originality is shown in his analysis of the beneficial effect which the passion, so oddly initiated, gradually has upon the nature of both lovers. It must not be overlooked that, in *The Angel in the House,* Patmore is careful to present to us two hearts which are fresh, not worn or stale, both still wholly virginal in their simple delectation. He dwells on the mystic purpose of this sexual attraction which he paints so clearly, with so little taint of false modesty. He shows the general benefit to mankind which accrues from the accelerated vigour of the individual, and he does not pretend to minimize the egotism of the lovers. He admits that their very sacrifices are egotistical. But he revels in praise of the new courage which comes to them from a consciousness of the inviolable fidelity of their mutual desires, and he launches his ideal couple upon

> Love's living sea by coasts uncurb'd,
> Its depth, its mystery and its might,
> Its indignation if disturb'd,
> The glittering peace of its delight.

The careful reader of *The Angel in the House,* and especially of the brilliant and elaborate section entitled "The Espousals," will note with admira-

tion the skill with which Patmore develops the progress of the passion. What is apt to seem a flash of fire to the participants, and a pause of unrelieved tedium to the bystander, is perceived by the poet to have a logical evolution of its own. He dwells with chaste rapture on the joys which are the prelude to that mystery of immaculate indulgence which was the aim of his vision. Here he was at one with the amorous mystics of the poetic literature of all time, with the authors of *The Song of Songs,* and of the *Pervigilium Veneris,* and of the *Roman de la Rose.* At his highest—as for instance, in the long section called "The Abdication,"—which cannot be examined here at length, but should be carefully studied—Patmore is with these poets at their best.

An unpublished letter from Carlyle, which lies before me as I write this page, shows that he at least was not blind to the extraordinary elevation of this new species of erotic poetry. Writing from "Gill, Cummertrees, Arran," in 1856, immediately after the publication of *The Espousals,* Carlyle says:—

"I brought it with me into these parts, the only modern book I took the trouble with. Certainly it is a beautiful little piece; high, ingenious, fine. The delineation of the thing is managed with great art, *thrift*, and success . . . I have to own the

whole thing is an ideal; soars high above reality, and leaves mud of fact (*mud* with whatever *stepping stones* may be discoverable there) lying far under its foot."

The veteran Walter Savage Landor welcomed the same volume in terms which were still more appropriate. "Never," he wrote, "was anything more tender . . . I rejoice to find that Poetry has come out again safe, and that Love has clipt his wings and cooled his tender feet in our own pure streams." And Emerson wrote, "I give you joy and thanks as the 'maker of this beautiful poem.'"

The philosophy of *The Angel in the House,* however, cannot be appreciated unless we recognize that Patmore loathed and rejected the scholastic theory that marriage is nothing but a *remedium amoris,* a compromise with frailty, a best way of getting out of a bad business. On the contrary, he regarded it as a consecration of the highest human virtue, and he held that the more exquisite is the goodness which is perceived, or imagined, in each loved one by the other, the more perfect will be the marriage, and more firmly based on reverence and hope. It is amusing to record that when he became a Catholic, Patmore was for some time uncertain whether or no to reconcile *The Angel in the House* with Roman doctrine. At

first he thought he could not do so, and he withdrew the volumes from circulation. Then he was persuaded that their teaching received a radiant justification in the tenets of the Church, and he resumed his satisfaction in them. But, as a matter of fact, the question was one neither of theology nor of logic, but of individual lyricism. *The Angel in the House* is a purely æsthetic observation of a certain phase of life, conceived in the intoxicating light of imagination. This phase of life is so important that all others may be said to depend upon it, yet from the majority of mankind it has received nothing but ridicule or neglect. It is Patmore's great claim upon our respect that he has perceived its dignity and recorded its phases.

CHAPTER IV

HAMPSTEAD AND HERON'S GHYLL (1862–1870)

THE success of *The Angel in the House* was not immediate with the general public. The poem was anonymous, and there seems to be a reluctance on the part of readers of poetry to accept verse which is not made personally attractive by the name of its author. The earliest instalment, *The Betrothal* (1854), was fairly well received by the press, but *The Espousals* (1856) was at first met by total silence, the most repulsive form of attack known to the sensitive race of poets. To be spoken ill of is painful enough, but not to be spoken of at all is a thousand times more distressing. "Resolving not to die of dignity," however, Patmore wrote to Henry Reeve asking him to neutralize in the *Edinburgh Review* the neglect of the rest of the press, but it was not until 1858 that an admirable article by Aubrey de Vere greeted in that powerful organ the completed edition of the first part of *The Angel in the House*. By this time the poem had been reprinted, and admired, in America, and transatlantic praise reverberated ad-

vantageously in the London book-shops. The work which, under the general title, now became so popular, was, as must be carefully insisted on, the united and almost re-written *Betrothal* and *Espousals*.

But this was but a third of the poem as Patmore planned it. These two parts were to have been followed by four others, two of which, *Faithful for Ever* (1860), and *Victories of Love* (1863) actually appeared, as has been already reported. Mr. Basil Champneys surmises that, after the death of his first wife, "Patmore had not the heart to complete the scheme, which apparently contemplated giving in greater detail the subsequent life of Felix and Honoria." It is doubtful whether he would have recovered a freshness of treatment, which to most of his readers seems to flag with the opening of *Faithful for Ever*. It is no argument in favour of *The Victories of Love* that its author continued to prefer it to *The Betrothal*, since writers almost invariably love best their least beautiful productions. The question of the development of style in the whole poem has already been touched upon. It is enough here to say that the public unquestionably accepted the two later sections as a pleasant narrative in verse tacked on to their genuine favourite, the history of Felix and Honoria, but it has always been to the

two earlier sections that the great success of the work has been attached.

What that success amounted to, it may be as well to state here, although it belongs in its fullness to a much later period of Patmore's history than we have yet reached. It began in 1863 when the two-volume edition, including *The Victories of Love,* for the first time gave the general public a uniform text of their favourite work. Long before this, the praises of Tennyson and Carlyle, of Ruskin and Rossetti, of Robert and Elizabeth Browning, had given the author all the encouragement and joy that a poet in his youth could long for. The circle, like that created by a pebble thrown into a pool, vibrated more and more widely, with less intensity but with greater scope, and in a very short time *The Angel in the House* became the most popular poetical work of the generation. It was, for a while, the solitary successful rival of Tennyson's successive publications, competing without difficulty with *The Idyls of the King,* and with *Enoch Arden.*

Among the best critics this popular success was itself a danger, and it was the exorbitant preference of readers for such innocent and idyllic verse that led to the attacks which were directed against Tennyson and Patmore alike during the revolutionary period which followed the publication of

Mr. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* in 1866. It may be said that it was from 1854 to 1864 that the fame of Patmore, as the poet of *The Angel in the House,* was most prevalent with the critics. Up to this time, he was not a popular poet, but he was praised with the greatest enthusiasm by those who were accepted as judges. After this, for some fifteen years, he fell into critical desuetude, and was the object of very sarcastic and often very unjust animadversions; but the public did not follow the critics. Just about the time when their reviews began to tell them not to admire *The Angel in the House,* readers found that they had formed a passion for it, and the popularity of the book steadily increased. At the time of Patmore's death, it was found that the total sale had exceeded a quarter of a million copies.

This result was due, of course, mainly to the eminently attractive nature of the sentiment revealed in the poem. But several of Patmore's friends, by ardent and generous partisanship, vastly accelerated the appreciation of educated readers. Among such friends, the leading position was taken by Ruskin, who overlooked no opportunity, whether in public or in private, of enlarging Patmore's circle of admirers. In 1860, when the poet had been the victim of some particularly unintelligent piece of reviewers' folly, Ruskin seized the

occasion to make a sort of public confesson of faith in the genius of his friend. He wrote, in a famous letter:—" I am bound to express my obligation to Mr. Patmore, as one of my severest models and tutors in the use of English, and my respect for him as one of the truest and tenderest thinkers who have ever illustrated the most important, because commonest, states of human life." All through this period, from *The Elements of Drawing* of 1857 to *Sesame and Lilies* in 1865, when Ruskin's support was most valuable in consideration of his vast and docile circle of disciples, he never hesitated to give it to the poet whom he admired and esteemed so highly. He quoted and praised *The Angel in the House* in his lectures; he recommended it to the enthusiastic clubs and coteries that begged him for advice. Ruskin never shifted his allegiance; the first time he read *The Betrothal* he said that the complete work " ought to become one of the most *blessedly* popular books in the language," and he consistently did what he could to hasten on this pleasant consummation.

On July 5, 1862, in a little house which they were renting at Hampstead, Emily Patmore died after a long illness. This event formed a crisis in the career of her husband, and something of a changed view both of life and literature appears in his diary and his letters from this moment. He

had become absorbed in and as it were transmuted by her presence. It was with reluctance that he left her for a few hours each day, and with violent emotions of home-sickness he went straight back to her as soon as his duties permitted his return. "Her kind and wise mind; her wifely love, which acutely felt every variation of my irregular moods, yet never showed any impatience; her honest heart, which instantly discerned the right in every moral question; her lofty simplicity," these were traits to which he never became accustomed, but which held their lustre freshly for him to the last. In terms of admirable felicity, he had noted that:—

> An idle poet, here and there,
> Looks round him; but, for all the rest,
> The world, unfathomably fair,
> Is duller than a witling's jest.
> Love wakes men, once a lifetime each;
> They lift their heavy lids, and look;
> And, lo, what one sweet page can teach,
> They read with joy, then shut the book.
> And some give thanks, and some blaspheme,
> And most forget: but, either way,
> That and the Child's unheeded dream
> Is all the light of all their day.

In this mellow light Patmore had lived for fifteen years, always conscious of its radiance, not forgetting, not blaspheming, never failing to give thanks. There was but one source of possible divi-

sion between him and his wife, and that had not become a serious one when she was taken from him. More precisely, perhaps, it should be said that it had only just become serious. Emily Patmore "had been terrified from her cradle with the hideous phantom which Puritanism conjures up when the Catholic religion is named." Coventry Patmore, a mystic in the very essence of his nature, was more and more irresistibly, although unconsciously, being drawn in the direction of the transcendent and the supernatural. There was no discussion of religious difficulties between the husband and wife, simply because, in the advance of her malady, Emily could not endure it. Coventry did not admit, and was not indeed aware of any leaning to Rome, but the acute sensibility of his wife detected the trend of feeling. On her death-bed, and indeed only a few days before the close, she startled him by saying, with tears, "When I am gone, they (the Catholics) will get you; and then I shall see you no more."

Her death, occurring at such a psychological moment, disturbed almost as much as it grieved him. He was not merely bowed down with sorrow, but assailed by poignant doubts. The blow was overwhelming in a double direction, and in its homely aspect it left him, with his large young family and his straitened circumstances, almost

helpless to perform the duties which had fallen from her hands. Notwithstanding this, his spiritual life seems to have become calmer and more concentrated than it had ever been. He was driven in upon himself. The loss of his faultless companion was coincident with a strange unkindness and indifference on Tennyson's part, which deprived him of the friend whom he had loved and admired the most. It is probable that his affection had never been returned with anything like an equal ardour, but this did not prevent the fact of Tennyson's neglectful silence from wounding Patmore to the quick. In his bitterness, he felt that love and friendship were alike lost to him, and he developed a sort of austere inaccessibility which was quite new to him. Remembering his experience with Tennyson, he was unwilling to trust his confidence to others, and he drew aside into loneliness with his children's animal cares and wants alone to distract him. He was rewarded by an accession of mystical rapture, of which he has given this account:—

"For many months after [my wife's] death, I found myself apparently elevated into a higher spiritual region, and the recipient of moral powers which I had always sought, but never before abidingly obtained. As far as I could see, God had suddenly conferred upon me that quiet personal apprehension and love of Him and entire submis-

sion to His will, which I had so long prayed for in vain; and the argument against my change of religion which I had before drawn from my wife's state, I now drew from my own: concluding that this faith could not be wrong which bore such good fruits. But I discovered, as the sense of her spiritual presence with me gradually faded, that I was mistaking the tree which was producing these fruits. It was not that of supernatural grace in me, but the natural love of the beauty of supernatural grace as I recalled it in her; and, at the end of a year, I found myself greatly advanced indeed towards that inviolable fidelity to God which He requires, but still unmistakably short of its attainment."

During this time, while he shrank from the company of his earlier associates, there were some of them who would not let him go. Prominent among these was Woolner, whose poem of *My Beautiful Lady* was at this time published, not without Patmore's careful final revision, and Aubrey de Vere, of whose lyrics Henry Taylor and Patmore in concert now printed a selection. But the most remarkable new acquaintance formed at this period was that of William Barnes, the poet of the Dorsetshire dialect. All his life, Patmore was singularly attracted to the language, atmosphere and modes of thought of that district of

England which Mr. Hardy has taught us to call Wessex. Patmore thought it the most classical, the richest and most abundant province of our country. Barnes, although at this time a man of over sixty years of age, had not yet inherited his full renown. His third collection of *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect* had appeared in 1862, and had come into Patmore's hands. He liked them, and he turned to the earlier collections of 1844 and 1859, and enjoyed these still more; he wrote articles in several prominent periodicals claiming for the work of Barnes a prestige which it had never before been granted.

When he began to correspond with the Dorsetshire poet, he found many links of a private kind. Barnes had been bereaved, as Patmore had been, of a devotedly worshipped wife, who had left a similar number of little children behind her. The two poets wrote to one another consolingly "of the result of a like loss from a matured experience." In the early months of 1863 Patmore declared to Barnes that no other living man's history attracted him so much as the Dorset poet's did; "I stedfastly intend to see you this year," he added. Neither Patmore nor Barnes was rich enough to travel recklessly. But in the summer of 1863 the former, irresistibly drawn, contrived to make his way to Dorchester. He had formed a very exalted

Heron's Ghyll.

notion of his host; he discovered a plain little old man, adorably simple, dressed picturesquely in the garments of a past age, gifted with an instinctive power of idyllic song, but of limited experience in life and thought. Patmore was full of poetry, and inspired by transcendent speculations; he found Barnes surrounded by glossaries and grammars. As Patmore whimsically described it, years afterwards, to a friend who had been visiting at Came Winterbourne the then very venerable Mr. Barnes —he wanted to discuss the mystery of the Incarnation and he found Barnes buried "in a horrible kind of philological thing he called *Tiw.*" Patmore retained through life his high respect for the character and genius of Barnes, but I do not think that he made any further attempt to cultivate his personal acquaintance.

This was an example of the idealizing habit which grew upon Patmore at this time, and which coloured the rest of his communications with his fellow-beings. He was irresistibly induced to set before them an exceedingly high standard of conduct, of achievement, of capacity. Nobody came up, in common life, to Patmore's conception beforehand of what they were capable of being and doing. It was not censoriousness which made him exacting, it was rather the heated atmosphere in which he saw life. What seemed a harshness often

sprang out of a fondness, for it was his very belief in the high capacity of those whom he admired which led so inevitably to disappointment. He thought in hyperbole, and nothing was moderate or mediocre with him. If he approved of a person, that person walked along the mountain-tops, with the light of God upon his face. He disapproved, and the man became not merely a failure, a poor creature, but a positive *cretin*, a blot upon the face of nature. This violence of judgment, and this disproportionate idealism, had always, no doubt, been present in his nature, but they were kept in hand by his first wife's sober and firm influence. After her death, in the earliest painful months of isolation, they asserted themselves and became patently characteristic.

Patmore's relations to his own children partook of this extravagance of feeling. From 1862 to 1864 they formed his principal solicitude, and no man, left lonely in this piteous condition, was ever more anxious to do his duty to those for whose lives he was responsible. Many of his letters from this period have been printed by his careful and tactful biographer; it is impossible to deny that they give a somewhat painful impression. One little girl has expressed the hope that her sister will not be disappointed by something; her father writes: "You may be quite sure that I am as

tender about Bertha's feelings as you are." The four younger children were placed, early in 1863, in the care of some ladies at Finchley, and Patmore saw them almost every day. He loved them, and they seem to have been both intelligent and well-behaved. But he suffered cruelly from the utterly impossible standard of conduct which he placed before them. He made no allowance for the instability of childhood or even for the frailty of mankind. His spirit was ceaselessly sore within him because some little naughty person had been disobedient, or boisterous, or forgetful. "The *immense* superiority of girls over boys" struck him more and more forcibly, but even girls were sadly to seek. Quite little girls, alas! find it difficult to say their prayers and read quite "as willingly and long and deliberately" as Patmore expected his daughters to do.

The constant strain of responsibility for these young motherless creatures was very trying to his nerves. He gave the subject a consideration too constant, and he lost, in his lonely excitement, a sense of proportion. All the little wayward errors which a mother deals with so patiently, corrects so gently and says nothing about, took monstrous proportions to this austere idealist, with his impossible expectations. He was driven to an exaggeration which must make us smile. He wrote: "I have

indeed very little respect for children. Their so-called innocence is want of practice rather than inclination, and all bad passions seem to me to be more violent in children than in men and women, and more wicked because in more immediate conjunction with the divine vision." This view has at least the interest of being diametrically opposed to the lazy optimism which treats children as waxen toys whose very faults are funny. Sin did not amuse Patmore, and what is worthy of a smile is not the suggestiveness of the moral paradox, but its pathetic exaggeration. Before a widower with a flock of youthful souls to take care of can write thus, he must have undergone a good deal of internal exasperation for which his boisterous babes are only in part to blame.

It was at this time, and after one of these painful moods, that he wrote the ode called "The Toys," which illustrates, with more delicacy and truth of analysis than any biographer can hope to seize, the ceaseless oscillation of his spirit between severity and tenderness. It is a "document" of the highest possible value to us in forming a just notion of the temperament of Patmore:—

My little Son, who looked from thoughtful eyes
And moved and spoke in quiet grown-up wise,
Having my law the seventh time disobey'd,

I struck him, and dismiss'd
With hard words and unkiss'd,
His Mother, who was patient, being dead.
Then, fearing lest his grief should hinder sleep,
I visited his bed,
But found him slumbering deep,
With darken'd eyelids, and their lashes yet
From his late sobbing wet.
And I, with moan,
Kissing away his tears, left others of my own;
For, on a table drawn beside his head,
He had put, within his reach,
A box of counters, and a red-vein'd stone,
A piece of glass abraded by the beach,
And six or seven shells,
A bottle with bluebells,
And two French copper coins, ranged there with careful art,
To comfort his sad heart.
So when that night I pray'd
To God, I wept, and said:
  Ah! when at last we lie with trancèd breath,
Not vexing Thee in death,
And Thou rememberest of what toys
We made our joys,
How weakly understood
Thy great commanded good,
Then, fatherly not less
Than I whom Thou hast moulded from the clay,
Thou'lt leave Thy wrath, and say,
"I will be sorry for their childishness."

But everything was drawing him in one inevitable direction, although as yet he knew it not.

Nothing served to assuage his melancholy, which time seemed to deepen rather than to remove. The great religious question oppressed his thoughts more and more. He was already a man of settled practical piety, and nothing in his conduct or his habits of thought interfered with the perfect candour of his soul in relation to heavenly things. In later years he never accused himself of anything more serious than ignorance of the will of God in this slow and painful transformation of his faith. Something began to draw him irresistibly to the city of Rome, and in February, 1864, he obtained the needful leave of absence for the purpose of making a lengthy stay there. He started with no anticipations of pleasure on the way—"I expect to be very dull and miserable,"—but as though drawn by some superhuman force along an inevitable path. Aubrey de Vere, however, was in Rome, "and nobody can be dull or miserable where Mr. de Vere is." Patmore's first impression of Rome was deeply unfavourable; the idealist had been at work, as usual, and had formed a dream-picture of a celestial city, all majesty and refinement, which the squalid quarters of modern Rome most cruelly belied.

Patmore was admitted, however, into "the best Catholic society of the great centre of Catholic life," and at last, as if quite suddenly, he perceived

why he had come to Rome. It was that he might get the great question of religion settled once and for all. He accepted the situation, and placed himself under the regular instruction of a Jesuit, Father Cardella. He tells us that all his intellectual objections were confuted, and his will was more and more powerfully attracted, but that, together with the attraction, grew the alternating reluctance and repulsion. This went on for many weeks, in the friendly company of the gentle and distinguished persons, Italian and English, to whom Aubrey de Vere had presented him. "Their ways," he says, "convinced me that I should not be leaping into any strange gulf of uncongenial life if I became a Catholic, but no one helped me nearly so much to remove this fear as a lady whom I now met in this society."

This lady, destined to be Coventry Patmore's second Egeria, was Marianne Caroline Byles, who had at one time been looked upon as likely to be the second wife of Manning, and who had in comparatively mature years exchanged the Anglican for the Roman communion. She was older than the poet, being at this time nearly forty-two years of age. The influence which she exercised over Patmore is best described in his own words:—

"I had never before beheld so beautiful a per-

sonality, and this beauty seemed to be the pure effulgence of Catholic sanctity. After a short acquaintance, which progressed rapidly to intimate friendship, I asked her to be my wife. Her reply was that she was under a formal religious promise never to marry, having placed, by the hands of a priest, her written undertaking to that effect upon the altar and under the chalice containing the Blessed Sacrament. I thought this answer final, not having any idea how easily such undertakings are dispensed with in the Catholic Church, provided they are not monastic. I continued, but in much depression of spirits, my hitherto line of meditation, with the same alternation of periods of repulsion and attraction, and the same apparent hopelessness of reconciling reason and conscience, till one night, as I was sitting alone at my hotel, it struck me that nothing would ever bring about this reconciliation except the act of submission, and that this act certainly would do so. For the first time, I felt that I was able and that I ought to take this leap . . . and fearing that the clearness in which my path now lay might be obscured, I set off to the house of the Jesuits and insisted on being admitted, though it was long after the hour at which the rule had closed its doors. Father Cardella refused to receive me as a Catholic there and then, but I made my gen-

eral confession to him, and was received a day or two afterwards."

Patmore lived thirty-two years after this event, but no shadow of religious doubt ever crossed his understanding or his conscience again, and we have to regard him from this time forward as having come completely into harmony with the dogmas and the traditions of the Catholic Church. In this he displays an interesting likeness to a poet of the seventeenth century whose genius had some relation with his own, Richard Crashaw. An immediate result of the decisive step Patmore had taken was to remove the veil of nervous depression which had hung over him. He became radiant with spiritual complacency and joy, and everything around him was bathed in rose-colour. It is evident that his relation to Miss Byles immediately took a fresh aspect. She was the first person, outside the circle of the Jesuits, to whom he communicated the fact that he had found peace. Her scruples against marriage were no longer serious, or—as seems possible—she had dwelt upon them with feminine cunning in order to force him into the way of her faith. At all events we find the couple promptly betrothed (May 1864). But an honourable difficulty now arose. Patmore had believed Miss Byles to be the paid companion of an elder lady with whom she was travelling, and who

was evidently wealthy. To his extreme confusion he discovered that the money belonged to Miss Byles herself, who possessed a considerable fortune. Exceedingly annoyed and abashed at this circumstance, he suddenly left Rome and abandoned his suit; but he was persuaded to "condone the embarrassing condition" and to return. They went back separately to England, and in July were married at Bayswater.

Of Marianne Patmore, as she now became, singularly little has been preserved or recorded. She was a woman of taste and even of a little learning, pious, gentle and somewhat timid. Her husband's loud protestations and emphasis of statement kept her in a perpetual tremor, but she was entirely devoted to love and admiration of him. The faithful biographer of Coventry Patmore, Mr. Basil Champneys, has been obliged, after baffling search, to record of Marianne, the poet's second wife, that "the extraordinary self-effacement and reticence which was characteristic of her in life seems fated to attend her memory." She was her husband's devoted companion for nearly sixteen, as her predecessor had been for nearly fifteen years.

It is certain that during the debateable period between his first wife's death and his second marriage, Patmore's ideas with regard to poetry underwent a very remarkable change. In later life he

was accustomed to insist on the essential oneness of his work, and to point to its uniform features. But setting his eloquent casuistry aside, the reader cannot fail to see a very broad chasm lying between what he wrote up to 1862 and what he wrote after that date. In the first place the appeal to a popular judgment, to a wide circle of amiable readers, entirely disappears. Patmore, with the removal of so many earthly ties, and with the growth of what was mystical and transcendental in his temperament, became haughty in his attitude to the world. His conscientiousness as an artist was quickened, and at the same time he gave way to a species of intellectual arrogance which had always been dormant in his nature, but which now took the upper hand. He was no longer anxious to please by any concessions to the public taste, and the earliest sign of his altered temper was that discontinuance, of which mention has already been made, of *The Angel in the House*. In his new mood, he had nothing more to tell the curates and the ladies about Frederick and Felix.

His mind turned to another ambition. He formed the design of a long poem, the precise scope of which he never divulged, but which was to deal with the moral questions evoked by what the poet considered the grave decadence of the age. He was to sing, with fervour and despair, a

loud song which few would care to hear, but which had to be sung "because the dark comes on apace, when none can work for fear." From the first he had no illusions about the popularity of what he would now write:—

> One said, Take up thy Song,
> That breathes the mild and almost mythic time
> Of England's prime!
> But I, Ah, me,
> The freedom of the few
> That, in our free land, were indeed the free,
> Can song renew?
> Ill singing 'tis with blotting prison-bars,
> How high soe'er, betwixt us and the stars;
> Ill singing 'tis when there are none to hear.

It is of fragments of the poem inspired by this theme and in this mood that the *Odes* of 1868 were composed. We may see in these nine remarkable lyrics a certain note of unity in method, but of unity of subject there is very little. Patmore intended no doubt to make the poem a general confession, a record of his soul's adventures in face of life and the world. But it is doubtful whether even Milton or Leopardi, the two poets with whom at this juncture it is natural to compare him, could have succeeded in producing an integral work on these particular lines; and the partiality of a biographer must not blind us to the fact that we are

dealing with a writer of less constructive force than Leopardi, not to speak of Milton.

As the vehicle of his *Odes,* and indeed of most of the subsequent poetry of his life, Patmore chose a curious form, which was justified, I think, more by the admirable success of many of his experiments in it than by its inherent beauty. This was a broken and irregular arrangement in what he described as "catalectic" metre, but which reminded the profane of what Patmore particularly despised and rejected, the loose measures called Pindaric after Cowley's misconception of the metrical system of Pindar. Patmore scorned the amorphous odes of the Restoration period, and claimed that his own had no relation with them. Yet when Patmore is languid and Cowley is unusually felicitous, it is difficult to see much difference in the form of their odes. Whether Patmore ever acknowledged it or no, or indeed whether the fact has ever been observed, I know not, but the true analogy of his *Odes* is with the Italian lyric of the early Renaissance. It is in the writings of Petrarch and Dante, and especially in the *Canzoniere* of the former, that we must look for examples of the source of Patmore's later poetic form.

At the close of 1865, as it was no longer necessary for him to work for his living, and as a tendency to lung complaint warned him of the danger

of remaining in London, Patmore resigned his position as an assistant in the Library of the British Museum, and withdrew to the country. He bought two contiguous estates, covering about four hundred acres, on the borders of Ashdown Forest in Sussex. There was an ancient, but uncomfortable and neglected house, and this, with the whole of both estates, had to be taken in hand and improved. Nothing in the past experience of Patmore had prepared him for such labours; but his remarkable business ability only required an opportunity to develop itself. "The problem before him was to make his house healthy, habitable and architecturally pleasing; to convert the land adjoining it from its aspect of a somewhat neglected farm into the suitable setting of a gentleman's residence; to master all the details of agricultural management, game-preserving, and the duties of a landlord; and to do all this with extreme economy, so that each step taken might enhance the value of the estate by more than the expenditure." How he solved the problem is told in the little volume entitled *How I Managed and Improved my Estate* (1888), a book which goes far to outbalance the charges so often brought against poets as persons of no business capacity. After 1868 it was the garden, the fish-ponds and the woods which engaged his attention.

The exquisite serenity of this active and yet healthy and cheerful life is reflected on much of the verse that he wrote at this time. His invitation to Felicity was perfectly responded to:—

So with me walk,
And view the dreaming field and bossy autumn wood,
And how in humble russet goes
The Spouse of Honour, fair Repose,
Far from a world whence love is fled
And truth is dying because joy is dead . . .
Let us to stiller place retire,
And glad admire
How, near Him, sounds of working cease
In little fervour and much peace;
And let us talk
Of holy things in happy mood,
Learnt of thy blest twin-sister, Certitude.

He became calm, and he became gleeful. The old depression of spirits, the old irregularity of mood, passed away, and he was both mentally and physically invigorated. The name of the estate where the house stood was Buxted Old Lands, a title which the poet considered neither pretty nor significant; in 1868 he altered it to Heron's Ghyll, in reference to the beautiful, but marauding birds which gathered to his fish-ponds as to a banquet.

In April, 1868, Patmore printed for private circulation nine of the fragments which he had

probably[1] been writing at intervals since his first wife's death. They took the form of an anonymous paper pamphlet, with pale green covers, bearing only the words *Odes* [*not published*]; a short preface was signed "C. P., Old Lands, Uckfield, April 17, 1868." In 1881, before any bibliographical curiosity in Patmore's writings had been excited, I asked him how he could account for the extreme rarity of these *Odes*. He told me that only 250 copies were printed, and that he sent copies in all directions, to his friends, and to strangers who might, he fancied, be interested in them. But he found that they were universally received with indifference or mystification, and so one day, in the autumn of 1868, as he was seated in front of the great open fireplace in the hall of Heron's Ghyll, he determined to make away with what were left of them. His daughters, it appears, had fortunately withdrawn a few, but 103 copies remained, and these the poet destroyed then and there. The anonymous *Odes* of 1868 is therefore one of the rarest as it is one of the most interesting poetical volumes of the Victorian age.

It is difficult to account for the frigid reception, by Patmore's particular admirers, of poems so

[1] Mr. Basil Champneys' conjecture that all these nine odes were suddenly composed in the first three months of 1868, does not seem to me in accordance with probability or with internal evidence; but no record of their exact dates has been preserved.

original and in part so beautiful as these nine odes. Ruskin, it is true, though without enthusiasm, " recognized the nobleness " in them, and there is some reason to believe that Carlyle, with whom Patmore was just now again in intimate relations, approved. But Aubrey de Vere, whose graceful traditions they mortified, strongly disapproved of them, and others, like Tennyson, perceived nothing. It was at this moment that all England had its ears open to the brilliant melodies of Mr. Swinburne; no other music could be heard. Yet it seems amazing that among all the initiates and experts to whom the little pamphlet was sent there should not have been one who perceived, as a portent, the beauty of:—

> Love, light for me
> Thy ruddiest blazing torch,
> That I, albeit a beggar by the Porch
> Of the glad Palace of Virginity,
> May gaze within, and sing the pomp I see;
> For, crown'd with roses all,
> 'Tis thou, O Love, they keep thy festival!

or were amused by the audacity which described the year 1867, with its Reform Bill and its Disraeli as Chancellor of the Exchequer, as:—

> Year of the great Crime,
> When the false English nobles and their Jew,
> By God demented, slew
> The trust they stood thrice pledged to keep from wrong.

The fortunate thing is, however, that Patmore, however angry and disillusioned he might be, was thoroughly determined to proceed, and that the discouraging result of his experiment in 1868 did not in any degree prevent him from pushing on to further heights of boldness and vigour. The ultimate *Unknown Eros* could scarcely have been more admirable than it is if its beginnings had been greeted, as those of *The Angel in the House* had been, by the plaudits of Browning, Tennyson and Rossetti.

CHAPTER V

LAST YEARS (1870–1896)

PATMORE improved and enlarged Heron's Ghyll, until it became a sort of white elephant, and was too expensive for him to keep up. Moreover, agricultural depression began to make itself sensibly felt, and he feared to find himself stranded with a very costly toy which he could neither use nor part with. He was fortunate in letting and then selling the property in 1874 to the Duke of Norfolk, who gave him £27,000 for it, £8,500 more than the original cost and the improvements together had come to. This deserves peculiar celebration as an instance, possibly unique, of a poet's having made a substantially advantageous bargain in a business transaction. Between the letting and the final transference of Heron's Ghyll to the Duke, the Patmores took a furnished house in London, and at this time he made several of the acquaintances of his later life, besides reviving some old friendships. But London never suited his health, and he looked out at once for another and less responsible country residence.

When Patmore had been only five or six years of age he had been taken to Hastings in a coach, and had noticed, as they drove along the old London road, a large house facing the High Street, the whole front of which was covered by an enormous magnolia. The child registered a vow that when he grew up and was a man he would come and live in that beautiful house, with its casing of great white blossoms. It was somewhat extraordinary that in 1875, when he was looking about for a home, this identical dwelling, called the Milward Mansion, was offered to him. He accepted it with alacrity, and on terms which, as he believed, secured him the use of it for life. This residence had immense advantages for him. It was easy of access from London, whereas a visit to Heron's Ghyll had been like an adventure into virgin forest. It was exceedingly amusing, in its proximity to the picturesque life of the old borough, if Patmore wished to be amused; while it was so far protected and sequestered, that by stepping into the high terraced garden he could at any moment retire into absolute seclusion. For seventeen years the Milward Mansion (or Manor House) was Patmore's home, and he lived here in great serenity and independence, enlivened by frequent visits from his friends, and leading exactly the life which it pleased him to lead. The Hastings period was not without its sorrows;

its bereavements indeed were frequent and severe; but on the whole it was probably the happiest segment of the poet's life.

Among those with whom he had renewed personal intercourse in 1874 was Mrs. Procter. The aged poet, her husband, who had been known as Barry Cornwall, was at that time under a cloud of senile decay. Patmore's sympathies were warmly drawn out by the spectacle of his old friends' troubles, and he showed most delicate attention to Mrs. Procter. When her husband died at length, in the autumn of 1874, Patmore's kindly help was redoubled. In her cordial gratitude, Mrs. Procter thought to do Patmore honour by giving him the task of writing the life and editing the remains of Barry Cornwall. As he told me, soon after, he was "aghast" at the proposition, and did all he could to dissuade the lady, but she was firm in insisting. "I could not refuse," Patmore said, "though it was a task little suited to me. I was never really intimate with Procter, though I had known him many years; and though I admired his simple, sincere and reticent character, I cared little for his poetry." A biography started under these conditions was not likely to be satisfactory. After long delays there appeared at last, in 1877, *Bryan Waller Procter,* consisting of a memoir, an autobiographical fragment and some letters, the whole

put together in the most languid and perfunctory manner possible. The dangers of obliging Coventry Patmore to do something which he did not want to do were startlingly exemplified in this unfortunate volume, which is destitute of all biographical merit. Mrs. Procter, however, a woman of singular tact, professed herself well pleased with it. This biography, to which merely the initials C.P. were grudgingly affixed, was Patmore's earliest prose-work published in the form of a book.

He was now, however, preparing for the publication of a poetical work of the very highest importance. In 1873, as we have seen, a scruple of conscience had combined with an alteration of taste to make him for the moment profoundly dissatisfied with *The Angel in the House*. He withdrew this popular work from circulation, and made a bonfire of the remainder of the current edition. This strange prejudice, which soon passed away, was coincident with a violent impulse to produce poetry of that more mystical and transcendental order, of which the *Odes* of 1868 had given a small circle of readers the foretaste. To a friend, who gently reproached him with idleness, he replied:— "No amount of idleness is wrong in a poet. Idleness is the growing time of his harvest," and he indicated that the field of his imagination was growing ripe for the sickle:—

" I have no plans as yet, for none of my old ones seem wide enough; but I am preparing myself, by six or seven hours reading and thought every day, for *any* plans that may be presented to me. If I am to do any more work, it must be on some new level. The longer it is before the key-note of my new song is given to me, the sweeter perhaps it will be."

In the transition, it seems that Ruskin was of great service. It will be recalled that in 1868 he had not perfectly responded to the appeal of the *Odes*, but he now wrote that " no living human being had ever done anything that helped him so much " as Patmore had by writing these poems. Yet the poet continued to wait, as he always did, for " a flash of spiritual health " to reawaken his genius. He read mystical Catholic poetry, and in particular the *De Partu Virginis* of Sanazzaro, but that did not inspire him. The settling in of his household, under the great magnolia at Hastings, seems at last to have started the beat of the pulse of poetry, although the vigorous ode called " The Standards " is earlier still and belongs to 1874. Another political satire, " Peace," perhaps opens the series of odes written at Hastings, but to 1876 certainly belong " A Farewell," " Let Be," " The Two Deserts," and " If I were Dead," amongst others. An undated note, which may perhaps be

attributed to 1877, says, "I have written as much in the last three weeks as the whole of the nine *Odes*." His best things were always composed most quickly. The "Deliciæ Sapientiæ de Amore," one of the longest and most elaborate of the new odes, took two hours to write, and several of the best numbers in *The Unknown Eros* even less, although Patmore would often occupy days and weeks in polishing up one short passage to the level of the best.

The outburst of this passion of poetry, and the rapid ripening of this second and richer harvest of Patmore's genius was coincident with an emotional crisis in his religious life. He was now in his fifty-fifth year, and had reached an age at which it is usual for the more vivid impulses of brain and body to decline. At fifty-four a man has usually tasted all the dishes which make up the banquet of life, and has no great desire to begin the feast over again. He has formed his opinions and appeased his curiosity, and he is fortunate if he has not allowed his experience to fortify him in that "sotte et caduque fierté," which Montaigne describes as the intellectual vice of approaching old age, that obstinate satisfaction in what is already known and seen which dulls the heart and fossilizes the brain. On the contrary, at this advanced stage of middle life, a great wave of passion broke over Patmore's

spirit, and bore him along with it. His imagination, his mystical and his religious vitalities were simultaneously quickened, and he walked along the sea by Hastings, or over its gorse-clad downs, muttering as a young man mutters, with joy uplifting his pulses and song breaking from his lips.

This condition had been preceded by a depressed and melancholy one. He had thought himself failing both in intellectual and spiritual power. His digestion had long been weak, and in consequence he had availed himself of the dispensations from fasting which the Catholic Church so readily grants for a reasonable cause. Patmore had set his dulness down to overindulgence, and when the fast of 1877 came round, he resolved to keep it fully. He was unable, however, to digest eggs or fish, and so had to keep the fast on vegetables. This reduced him to the verge of a serious illness, but an alteration of diet staved off the malady. He was not aware of a further change, but it probably came about Easter, 1877. Doubtless the physical conditions helped to bring it on, and it is difficult to believe that the severe fasting, although weakening for the moment, had not been salutary. The religious development which now followed he had described in terms of great moderation and simplicity in a fragment of autobiography. He had now for thirteen years been a member of the

Roman Church, and during all that time no shadow of a doubt had crossed his understanding. But there were certain points on which his feelings had always been hopelessly out of harmony with the feelings and practice of most Catholics. This was particularly the case with regard to the Blessed Virgin. His experience is so interesting, that it is best here to give his own words:—

"I was in the habit, indeed, of addressing Her in prayer, and believed that I had often found such prayers to be successful beyond others; but I could not abide the Rosary, and was chilled and revolted at what seemed to me the excess of many forms of devotion to Her. Good I hoped might come of some practical contradiction of this repugnance, some confession in act and will of what my feelings thus refused to accept. I therefore resolved to do the very last thing in the world which my natural inclination would have suggested. I resolved to make an external profession of my acceptance of the Church's mind by a pilgrimage to Lourdes. This I undertook without any sensible devotion, and merely in the temper of a business man who does not leave any stone unturned when a great issue is at stake, though the prospect of attaining thereby what he seeks may seem exceedingly small. Accordingly, on the 14th of October 1877, I knelt at the shrine by the River Gave, and rose without

any emotion or enthusiasm or unusual sense of devotion, but with a tranquil sense that the prayers of thirty-five years had been granted."

The importance of this passage, to the student of Coventry Patmore's character, is not to be exaggerated. It offers us the key of his life, his attitude, his entire contribution to literature; it offers us the key, but it leaves to us the task of turning it in the lock. He does not mention here, what was a deliberate part of his plan, that he hoped to get fresh inspiration for his Odes from the atmosphere of Lourdes. In this he was not disappointed. He had not anticipated any natural charm in the Pyrenean place of pilgrimage, but he found that "for beauty and sublimity it defies all description." Not ready to expatiate in full-mouthed catalogues of the charms of scenery, he has nowhere in all his correspondence indulged in so many enumerations of them as in connection with his visits to Lourdes:—

"The effect of this climate on the health and spirits is quite intoxicating," he says for instance in October 1877. "The air is cool and sharp, but the sun is like a hot fire close by. One may put up one's hands to warm them by it. The world looks like a jewel for brightness. Snow-fields, thirty miles off, look half a mile away. Little lizards run about the rocks in the hot light, and beautiful half-

butterflies, half-grasshoppers, leap and fly whenever one moves."

He came home full of enthusiasm and happiness, in perfect health, and longing to relieve in the composition of poetry that vibration of ecstasy which made dreams of his days and kept him awake for joy at night. The series of odes, thirty-one in number, which formed the collection entitled *The Unknown Eros,* were rapidly revised and completed, and this important volume made its appearance in 1877. But it did not contain the great ode called "The Child's Purchase," which seems to have taken shape on the poet's return journey from Lourdes. It had flashed upon him during his pilgrimage that the one absolutely lovely and perfect subject for poetry, as he conceived it, would be the Marriage of the Blessed Virgin. He had for some time been laying, as he hoped, a durable foundation for the exercise of his mystical fancy by reading daily in St. Thomas Aquinas. The copy in which he studied the *Summa* was one of consummate beauty; it was of the first edition of the *Opera Omnia* (1570–71), in seventeen volumes, printed on vellum and bound in purple morocco.[1] Patmore

[1] For an interesting account of this bibliographical treasure, which Patmore ultimately gave to the British Museum, see Mr. Basil Champneys' *Life and Letters,* vol. ii., appendix 6, pp. 443–445.

considered St. Thomas "a huge reservoir of the sincere milk of the Word," and the result of studying him seriously was that in his own brain the poetry began to grow "like the moonrise when the disk is still below the horizon."

The ode which has just been mentioned, "The Child's Purchase," should be examined if we wish to obtain an insight into Patmore's intentions at this critical moment. It contains a direct dedication of his powers to that service and celebration of the Blessed Virgin which, up to this time, he had neglected. He describes himself as a child, whose mother in jest flings him down a golden coin. This is, of course, his poetical genius. He is to spend, that is to say to exercise, it as he best pleases, and he will buy "a horse, a bride-cake, or a crown." But he wearies in the quest, and determines at last to bring his gold coin back to his Mother and to give it back to her in exchange for a kiss. Accordingly, "verging upon, but never entering, the breathless region of Divinity," Patmore will dedicate his golden gift of poetic speech, no longer to any earthly use, however innocent or salutary, but to the direct glory of the divine Mother:—

> Ah! Lady elect,
> Whom the Time's scorn has saved from its respect,
> Would I had art
> For uttering this which sings within my heart!

But, lo!
Thee to admire is all the art I know.
My mother and God's; Fountain of miracle!
Give me thereby some praise of thee to tell . . .
Grant me the steady heat
Of thought wise, splendid, sweet,
Urged by the great rejoicing wind that rings,
With draught of unseen wings,
Making each phrase, for love and for delight,
Twinkle like Sirius on a frosty night.

The same poem, imperfect perhaps from its very excess of emotion, but possessing admirable portions, closes with lines which have a great value in the biography of our poet. Looking back at his past verse, he cries:—

Mother, who lead'st me still by unknown ways,
Giving the gifts I know not how to ask,
Bless thou the work
Which, done, redeems my many wasted days,
Makes white the mark,
And crowns the few that thou wilt not dispraise,
When clear my songs of ladies' graces rang,
And little guessed I 'twas of thee I sang!
Vainly, till now, my prayers would thee compel
To fire my verse with thy shy fame, too long
Shunning world-blazon of well-ponder'd song;
But doubtful smiles, at last, 'mid thy denials lurk;
From which I spell,
"Humility and greatness grace the task
Which he who does it deems impossible!"

This prodigious effort—and no lyrical poet has moved in a more ambitious cause—was doomed to disappointment. Of the majestic song in praise of the Blessed Virgin nothing remains but the initial ode and a few fragments,—merely a porch, where a cathedral was intended to rise. Perhaps the strain was excessive; perhaps Patmore did not wait with sufficient serenity of spirit for the heavenly spark to fall. All we know is that the great poem for which he made his pilgrimage to Lourdes remains in the limbo of unconstructed masterpieces.

Meanwhile, he was more fortunate with humbler and less transcendental themes. In 1878 he published *Amelia,* which is at once the most human and the most inspired of all his writings, that in which his poetic philosophy is most plainly revealed. Some seventeen odes, also subsequent to the *Unknown Eros* of 1877, completed this section of his work. Of these several give expression to a political hopelessness which was obviously excessive at the time, and which the passage of years has shown to be wide of the mark. Without deciding whether the trend of politics, with its long upward and downward curves, has in the course of a quarter of a century been for practical good or evil, without expressing either joy or sorrow at the chronicle of our institutions, it has at least to be confessed that Patmore had no intuition of that trend. He was

the wildest of political prophets. In an ode like "Arbor Vitæ," the splendour of the imagery, the rush of inflamed and angry thought, must be accepted for their own sake; beneath the symbolism there lies no justice of public apprehension. The attacks of Patmore on the Government of his day are not contributions to philosophical poetry, consistent and intelligible even in their savagery, like the admirable *Iambes* of Auguste Barbier. They resemble much more those political odes of Leopardi, such as the "Italia" and the "Angelo Mai," in which the cup of scorn and anger overflows without an aim, merely covering the whole scheme of things with a spatter of contumely.

Far more delightful are the non-political odes of Patmore which represent this his latest period as a poet. A section of them—"Saint Valentine's Day," "Sponsa Dei," "Psyche's Discontent," "To the Body"—deals with profound and subtle questions of sex, mystically encountered. Other odes are purely human, enchanting memories of past suffering nobly borne, jewels fashioned in the furnace of bereavement, "The Azalea," "Departure," "Auras of Delight." For the future all are inextricably mingled in the division of his poetry which Patmore chose to call *The Unknown Eros,* and there they will doubtless remain, like Rosicrucian symbols, wholly unintelligible to the multitude,

The Lodge, Lymington.

but discovered with a panic of delight by a few elect souls in every generation.

The publication of *The Unknown Eros* and of *Amelia*, together with the resuscitation of *The Angel in the House*, should have made the year 1877–8 a period of partial revival in Patmore's career. But his reputation had sunk into almost complete desuetude, and it could not at once be revived. The tendency to revival, however, now set in in private; he made the acquaintance of several younger writers, and he found among them a sympathy which he had ceased to enjoy in his relations with the companions of his own youth. The memory of those who first came into communication with him at that time will dwell on the earliest manifestations of a certain modification in his character. They knew them as he was in the act of change; they saw him already coloured with transition. After 1880 he rather suddenly became an elderly man, having preserved his youth for an unusually long time. He lived sixteen years more, but these were years of withdrawal and meditation. In this closing period, Patmore preserved the unaltering appearance of one who sits waiting for an inevitable arrival. He chats, he writes a little, he accedes to the claims of society, but he is listening all the time for the sound of the chariot-wheels.

It may be convenient here for me to take up this little history from a more intimate standpoint.

My personal acquaintance with Coventry Patmore had opened by his courteously sending me, in the summer of 1878, the four-volume edition of his complete works, then just published. In 1879 I met him for the first time at the Savile Club, of which he was for a short while a member. It was in company with several other and younger men, and he made a highly disagreeable impression on me; I thought him harsh and sardonic; he said little, and what he said was bitter. But, in the course of 1880, after his removal to Hastings, we began to correspond on the structure and function of the Ode, a subject which he had illustrated both in theory and practice, and on which his views were curious and, I ventured to think, on some points technically heterodox. At length, soon after New Year's Day, 1881, I was invited to Hastings to spend a Sunday with him; I went down, in some trepidation, remembering that countenance as of a sourer Macchiavelli which I had seen at the club, and my reception was a surprise and an enchantment. This was the first of unnumbered pilgrimages, to which I shall always look back as among the most tonic experiences of my social life.

He had taken, as we have seen, the Milward Mansion, a large, ancient house, then lately vacated

by the death of Countess Waldegrave, in the centre of the old town of Hastings. With its belt of venerable elms and its high garden-terraces, the mansion looked, as Patmore used to say, "like a patch of forest in the midst of the houses." It was approached from the High Street, but, the moment a visitor entered its enclosures, he seemed lifted at once out of the town, and suspended between cliff and sky and sea. When he entered, the room immediately on his left was the poet's study and the receptacle of his few books; beyond it, on the same side, a long, low drawing-room opened directly upon the garden, which surprised the eye here by its high level, the house being perched in a dip of a sharp incline. It is difficult to imagine a home better suited to a poet's vagaries, so sequestered was it within, so suddenly accessible from all parts of the surrounding town. At this time, and long afterwards, Patmore indulged a passion for nocturnal walks. Somnolent and sluggish in the afternoon, his pulse would begin to beat as the night came on, and would rise into an excitement which nothing but a long, wild stroll in the darkness could allay. On occasion of my first visit to him, in January, 1881, I recollect that I was summoned to accompany him. We sallied forth into the gloom of the faintly twinkling town, and descended swiftly to the sea-wall. The night was fine, with buffeting

wind, the remnant of a great storm; the tide was high, and it was difficult to pass along the Parade without being drenched by the fountains of spray which rose, mysterious and phantasmal, out of the resounding darkness. My companion was in an ecstasy; he marched forward with his head in the air, his loose, grey curls tossing in the breeze, his coat blown wildly away from his thin figure. He seemed, to my fancy, to be the enchanter whose magic had raised all this turmoil of the elements, and to be empowered, at will, to quiet it all in a moment. But this was evidently no part of his pleasure. He revelled, mischievously, in the riot, and he prophesied the ruin of the sea-front of Hastings in words the solemn effect of which was a little impaired by the violent gusto with which they were spoken. It was long before he could be persuaded that the tide was on the turn, and that Hastings could not perish on that particular night. And then his excitement fell; moodily and silently he climbed the deserted street.

Those who made Patmore's acquaintance within the last few years of his life recall his company as enlivened by short spurts of speech set in vast tracts of silence. But it was not so in 1881. The speech, at least, was more frequent, the silence less noticeably long. My first Sunday at Hastings was spent mainly at his study fire. I see him now,

stretched in his familiar seated attitude, his hands clasped, his arms extended along his legs, the whole body attenuated and immobile, only the marvellous head moving sharply and frequently, almost as if on a pivot, the eyes darkling and twinkling, the Protean lips reflecting in their curves every shade of feeling that passed over the poet's mind. Out of this attitude, he would move only to pounce, with extraordinary suddenness, on one of the cigarettes which lay strewn about, like leaves in Vallombrosa, lighting it and then resuming his shrouded and pinioned pose. And so sitting, sloped to the fire, he would talk for hours of the highest things, of thoughts and passions above a mortal guise, descending every now and then to earth in some fierce, eccentric jest, always to be punctuated by a loud, crackling laugh, ending in a dry cough.

In these first hours, he initiated me at once, almost without prelude, into the ardent and sublime mysticism which filled his imagination. That I quite comprehended would be to say too much, but I sympathized and admired. He could not discourse on these themes too fully for my curiosity, and conditions happened to have attuned my mind at that moment to a particularly keen receptivity. It would be affectation were I to pretend that the advent of a pupil so enthusiastic did not give the

solitary prophet pleasure; he expressed that pleasure with his customary vehemence; and as I look back I recognize with grateful satisfaction that I was able to comfort this austere and beautiful spirit by my sympathy at the moment of its deepest isolation. In 1881 the very name of Patmore was still ridiculous. *The Unknown Eros* was absolutely ignored; *The Angel in the House*, after its great, rustic success, was wholly rejected by those who were the tyrants of criticism. A very few persons of authority, among whom the late Henry Sidgwick and Mr. Frederick Greenwood were preeminent, still believed in Patmore as a poet, but their verdict was disregarded. He never ceased to believe in himself; indeed, at this very time, when not a voice came to greet him from the outer world, his virile pride was probably serener than it had ever been. But self-supporting as the soul may be, it pines for the human echo, and what little intelligent sympathy I could give was received as if it had been the gift of a king.

We ascended high indeed, the wren mounting with giddy rapture on the wing of the eagle. I have rarely touched such pure intellectual enjoyment. To listen to Patmore in those days, days of his spiritual ecstasy, before the bitterness had fallen upon him, was to assist at a solemn, mounting music. From having lived so much alone, from

having escaped all the friction of the mind which comes from indiscriminate intercourse, his speech and thought had preserved, with a certain savage oddity, a singular freshness, a wild flavour of the berry. In talking to him, one escaped from all the worn conventions of conversation; instead of rubbed and greasy coppers, one received fresh-minted gold. Patmore's intellect had now for a long while been fixed on a particular purpose, which may perhaps be defined as the reconciliation of modern life with the spirit of the liturgical manuals of his communion and the more mystical writings of the Fathers. He was particularly devoted to a later ascetic writer, St. John of the Cross, a Spaniard of the sixteenth century, in whom Patmore found an extraordinary agreement with the views which he himself had formed in meditation. He was fond of reading to me passages of St. John of the Cross, which often sounded exactly like rearrangements of *The Unknown Eros.* I was surprised to find in 1881 that Patmore was not acquainted with the poems of our own most fiery mystic, Crashaw, and I had the pleasure of sending them to him. But he knew the originals at which the torch of Crashaw had been lighted and was tiresomely conscious of the conceits and blemishes of an hysterical fancy. Yet " Music's Duel," the great paraphrase from Famianus Strada, he

pronounced " perhaps the most wonderful piece of word-craft ever done."

It was now years since he had written a page of prose, with the perfunctory exception of the *Bryan Waller Procter*, which he had published in 1877; in earlier youth, the practice of prose writing had afforded him profit and satisfaction. It appeared to me that it would now add alike to his usefulness and to his enjoyment if he resumed composition. Verse he had reluctantly abandoned for some time (I think that his very latest printed poem dates from 1880), on the ground that he had sung what he could not help singing, and that nothing should be torn from a reluctant muse. But I could see no reason why his exquisitely lucid prose should not be given to the world. To my first suggestions of this kind, he replied that " the little working power I have left in me is *bespoken*," meaning that he had not lost the hope that he might yet be inspired to continue the great poem on Divine Love which he had dreamed of at Lourdes. Under my continued pressure, however, in February, 1881, he showed me a MS. translation from St. Bernard on *The Love of God*, which his second wife, who died in 1880, had begun and he had completed. This he said I might find a publisher for, if I could, and I took it up to London with me. Mr. Kegan Paul consented to print it, and

a few months later it appeared. This is a very delightful treatise, far too little known. It is always exciting to a retired author to smell printer's ink once more, and Patmore forthwith started the composition of that "Sponsa Dei," of which I shall presently have a doleful tale to tell.

The latest of his poems, to which reference has just been made, is the "Scire Teipsum," which opens thus:—

> Musing I met, in no strange land,
> What meet thou must to understand:
> An angel. There was none but he,
> Yet 'twas a glorious company
> God, Youth and Goddess, one, twain, trine,
> In altering wedlock, flamed, benign,

which has always appeared to me an absolutely typical specimen of the peculiar Patmorian quintessence. In sending me the MS. of these verses (July 25, 1882) he wrote: "They may be taken . . . as expressing the rewards of virginity—attainable even in this life—in the supernatural order," and he went on to lament that his years forbade him to be any longer "a worker in the inexhaustible poetic mine of psychology." In point of fact, he was to publish verse no more.

His great interest in these years, in the early eighties, was the beautiful church of Our Lady Star of the Sea, which Mr. Basil Champneys was

building for him, almost opposite the Mansion, but a little lower down the street. This became Patmore's ceaseless pre-occupation, and a daily delight it was, when the workmen had left in the evening, to prowl and potter round the foundations in the dusk or watch the bright silver of the Channel from their precincts. As the fabric rose, Patmore's ecstasy increased; when the scaffoldings could be safely mounted, he could scarcely be induced to let them out of his sight. This intense satisfaction in the noble gift which he was presenting to his communion lasted until the church was consecrated, but was soon after embittered and destroyed by disputes which, at length, made him glad to leave Hastings. I think it right to record my opinion that in this wretched matter he was greatly in fault, through indulgence in that inflexible arrogance which was a defect in his great character, but the arguments on the other side, which Mr. Champneys has brought forward, should be carefully weighed. In connection with his own church, Patmore developed a sudden enthusiastic interest in ecclesiastical sculpture; this was awakened by seeing, in the summer of 1882, Mr. Thornycroft's superb statue of "Artemis" which belongs to the Duke of Westminster. The virginal freshness of this figure appealed with extraordinary fervour to Patmore's imagination, and

he desired that an attempt should be made to induce one of our first sculptors to model a Madonna, "of which," he said, "the marble original should be taken by some wealthy church like Arundel, and casts be supplied to other churches—including ours—at moderate prices." The notion of having a really first-rate statue, casts from which should supersede "the wretched Munich things Catholics now have to put up with," eagerly commended itself to him. He saw Woolner on the subject, and Mr. Thornycroft himself, but the idea, so eminently practical and felicitous, unhappily came to nothing. I believe that Cardinal Newman once made, equally in vain, an identical suggestion.

In February, 1883, Patmore lost his youngest son, Henry, a promising young man of less than three-and-twenty, in whom several of the characteristics of the father were repeated, and in particular a distinct gift of verse. Henry Patmore was steeped in the psychological mysteries of his father's conversation; his appearance was marred by his sickliness. He was tenaciously silent in company, and not what is called "attractive," yet evidently a studious, pious, and talented lad, whose future would probably have been brilliant. His little volume of *Poems*, arranged by his father, with a touching memoir by his sister, Gertrude,

now Mrs. Watts, was published at Oxford in April, 1884. These circumstances, and the death of an elder daughter, who was a nun in a convent, increased, about this time, the gravity and grimness of the poet, but without radically disturbing his serene inner life. That Henry's talents had not had an occasion to ripen was a disappointment to him; but he wrote, "I feel prouder and gladder of his innocent and dutiful life than if he had been the greatest poet of the age."

In 1884 the tide of detraction which had so long swept over Patmore's fame as a poet ebbed away. In several of the leading reviews there appeared articles in which the excellence of his work was more or less intelligently dwelt upon, and in which the importance of *The Unknown Eros* was emphasized. Through the period of his strange obscuration, Patmore had shown a dignified patience; but the neglect had not lasted long enough to sour him. The praise of the critics, the tributes which now began to flow in upon him from younger writers, gave him pure pleasure. In this year I saw more of him than ever, for he had determined that I was to be his literary executor, and he had to explain at great length his wishes regarding MSS. and books. From this agreeable but responsible duty he afterwards released me, on the very sensible ground that it was more con-

veniently fitted to a member of his own communion. The arrangements I speak of—which came to nothing—were hurried on in consequence of a rather serious illness, which reduced his spirits very greatly, and from the effects of which he perhaps never wholly recovered. In June, 1883, on a very hot day, he was unguarded enough to sleep for a couple of hours, stretched in the shadow of Bodiam Castle, a picturesque but highly malarious ruin on a small lake in the north of Sussex. As Patmore put it, the courtyard of this structure was "a cauldron of unwholesome marsh-air," which laid him up with a sharp attack of ague, and made him regard his future with a jaundiced eye.

The increase in public appreciation of his work was now steady. In the summer of 1886 an illustrated edition of *The Angel in the House* was projected, and Mr. Frank Dicksee and Mr. Alfred Parsons were asked to undertake it. As, however, these artists were found to be too deeply engaged, and as Patmore, with characteristic decision, said that it must be "those bodies or no bodies," the scheme fell through. But in collected and selected editions, cheap and dear, his poems now once more sold in great abundance; and with new prose his pen was kept relatively busy. In 1881, Miss Harriet Robson, long a valued friend of the family, became his third wife, and presently the birth of a

son in his old age gave the sequestered poet infinite occasions for fresh hopes and interests. And thus, to quote his own words, he remained "for several years, singularly happy, if to have friends, a fair competence, a rising family of extraordinary promise, and *no history*, is to be happy." And then an event occurred, to which, although it was purely of the intellectual order, I am inclined to attribute a critical importance in his career.

Since 1881 Patmore had been engaged on a prose work, called *Sponsa Dei*, which was in strict accordance with, and illustrated the same moods as *The Unknown Eros*. I had received minute instructions as to the publication of this book, which he had directed me, in case I survived him, to issue at a certain time after his decease. He must have completed the MS., I suppose, in 1883. An incident of a very startling nature disturbed this plan. On January 30, 1888, when I had been staying a day or two with Patmore at Hastings, he said to me at breakfast, abruptly, almost hysterically, "You won't have much to do as my literary executor!" and then proceeded to announce that he had burned the entire MS. of *Sponsa Dei* on the previous Christmas Day. His family knew nothing of this holocaust, and the ladies immediately cried, "O papa, that is why you have been so dreadfully depressed since Christmas!"

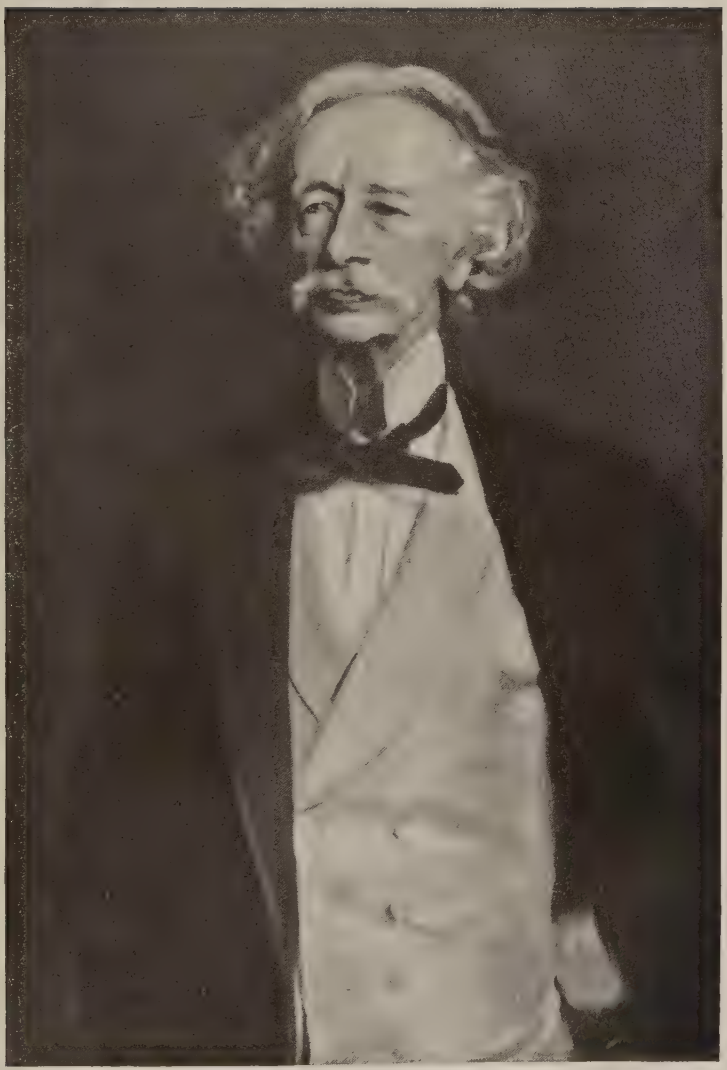
I said little at the moment, but when I was alone with him in the study, I asked him if he seriously meant what he had stated. He replied yes, that it was all destroyed, every scrap of it, every note, except one page, which he had published in 1887 in the "St. James's Gazette." He had come to the conclusion that, although wholly orthodox, and proceeding no further than the Bible and the Breviary permitted, the world was not ready for so mystical an interpretation of the significance of physical love in religion, and that some parts of the book were too daring to be safely placed in all hands.

It appeared that it was at the advice of a remarkable man of imperfect genius, Father Gerard Hopkins, that the act had been performed. When it was too late, Hopkins wished that he had been more guarded in making his reflexions. But he had placed before Patmore the dilemma of having either to burn the book or to show it to his director, and the latter alternative was offensive to the poet's pride.

The *Sponsa Dei*, this vanished masterpiece, was not very long, but polished and modulated to the highest degree of perfection. No existing specimen of Patmore's prose seems to me so delicate, or penetrated by quite so high a charm of style, as this lost book was. I think that, on successive occa-

sions, I had read it all, much of it more than once, and I suppose that half a dozen other intimate friends may have seen it. The subject of it was certainly audacious. It was not more nor less than an interpretation of the love between the soul and God by an analogy of the love between a woman and a man; it was, indeed, a transcendental treatise on Divine desire seen through the veil of human desire. The purity and crystalline passion of the writer carried him safely over the most astounding difficulties, but perhaps, on the whole, he was right in considering that it should not be thrown to the vulgar. Yet the scruple which destroyed it was simply deplorable; the burning of *Sponsa Dei* involved a distinct loss to literature.

From this time, although the change may not have been obvious to those who saw him daily, Coventry Patmore was an altered man. He began to grow old; he gradually lost the buoyant, joyous temperament which had been to him "the bliss of solitude." His judgment, which had always been violent, became warped, the expression of his preferences took an exaggerated form. He was none the less a delightful and stimulating companion, but he gave no longer the impression of inward serenity. This modification of his temperament proceeded slowly, but I do not think that the existence of it could be denied. In the summer



Coventry Patmore.

From the portrait by J. S. Sargent, R.A., 1894, now in the National Portrait Gallery
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Mr. William Heinemann

of 1889 he reprinted from the "Fortnightly Review" and the "St. James's Gazette" about thirty picked essays under the title of *Principle in Art;* this was a charming little book, extraordinarily finished in form and suggestive in ideas; most of it was written before the destruction of *Sponsa Dei.* In bringing it out, Patmore was amusingly defiant of criticism; he put his back to the wall and expected no mercy. He wrote, in a letter (June 17, 1889), the reviewers "will say, or at least feel, 'Ugh, ugh! the horrid thing! It's alive!' and think it their duty to set their heels on it accordingly." I think he was positively disappointed at the warmth and respect with which it was received by the press. When, a year later, one was recommended to look out for an article in the approaching "Fortnightly Review," where "by way of a spree, I have run a-muck against everything and everybody," one trembled, and not perhaps without cause. Patmore's latest serious utterances are to be discovered in two later volumes, *Religio Poetae,* 1893, and *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower,* 1895, where, in company with much that is wholly characteristic and perennially valuable, there is mingled not a little which savours, I think, of the aimless violence and preposterous paradox of failing power in a very original mind. And if anything could possibly console us for the

loss of so majestic a spirit and so dear a friend, it would be the conviction that his work was done.

He meant to lead the rest of his life at Hastings, in the house which he loved so much. He had a lease of it renewable every seven years, but at the end of the fourteenth year, in 1889, he asked the agent to change the tenure to an annual one. He did this, as he explained to me at the time, "in provision for the possibility of my dying and leaving my wife burthened with a long lease of a house much too large for her." The agent consented, but in 1891 the proprietor—a ward in lunacy—died, and the new owner immediately gave Patmore notice to quit, although it was represented to him in the strongest terms that there had been an understanding that the poet was not to be disturbed. Patmore loudly lamented "the immense trouble and loss to me in various ways, I having built a big Church opposite my door, invested the greater part of my money in local property," etc. etc. The law, however, was inexorable, and he had to go.

At Michaelmas, 1891, he quitted Hastings and was lucky enough to find a house that exactly suited him at Lymington. It was a bluish building, standing coyly askew among trees, very retired and dowdy-looking, on a muddy point of land opposite the Isle of Wight. There were passages,

winding staircases, raised landings, secret panels, thirty-five rooms all a little shrouded and sombre, but with enchanting views over the bright, tidal expanses. At the back of it stretched three acres of garden, rather dolefully overweighted with trees, green glades that led to pathless wastes, yew hedges, steep grass borders, empty hollows, and no flowers at all. Patmore's fancy was inflamed with the oddities of this queer place, which he declared, authoritatively, to be the most desirable estate in the county of Hampshire. That there was but one post a day, no delivery of newspapers, no Sunday trains, a toll of a halfpenny and a voyage in a ferry-boat on every excursion into the town, and a hundred little drawbacks of this kind, were, he declared, merely just what was wanted to make life at Lymington absolutely perfect.

During the last four years, years of considerable bodily suffering, borne with great resolution, the central fact in his life was certainly the devoted affection of a friend, of genius singularly cognate with his own. I can, however, but lament that Mrs. Meynell knew him intimately solely in that solemn close of his life, in which he seemed, as Mr. Francis Thompson has said of him, to have drunk

> The Moonless mere of sighs,
> And paced the places infamous to tell,
> Where God wipes not the tears from any eyes.

So, emphatically, does his image not appear in memory to those who were close to him in the unruffled and ensphered intensity of his middle life. His fatal complaint, which was angina pectoris, gave him many warnings and long periods of respite before the end came suddenly. A little act of imprudence, the result of a sense of unusual health, led to an attack in the early morning of November 24, 1896, and on the 26th, after an illness which was scarcely painful, and through which he was conscious of all the consolations of his religion, he passed away, in a cardiac syncope, in his house at Lymington. He was nearly half-way through his seventy-fourth year. Almost to the last hour he gave interesting evidence of the clearness of his intellect and the vigour of his will.

CHAPTER VI

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

THERE can be no question that at the present day too much attention is frequently given to the little acts and oddities of those whose real importance lies entirely in their productions. Our biographies tend to become anecdotages, and what is essential is lost in a tiresome record of what is accidental. The tendency of modern society is to take away the salient and the surprising elements from the lives of those whose chief mission is an intellectual or a moral one, and there is little that is not trivial or monotonous to record about most of our poets and philosophers. But to this rule every age produces eminent exceptions, and of these Coventry Patmore was one. To deal exclusively with his verses or, as some have wished to do, to soften into mediocrity the violent lines of his personal character, would be to stultify our aim. If we wish to preserve for posterity an opportunity to study this extraordinary man, it is necessary that we should preserve with care the character of his person as well as that of his works,

In dwelling faithfully upon what he was, those who observed him closely are not merely justified in setting forth their observations, but have a duty so to do. Patmore himself would have been the first to insist upon the fidelity. He was not one of those who wish the truth to be smothered in foolish posthumous flatteries; he never desired to see the forms of vitality attentuated, but always reinforced. His grim ghost will not rise to upbraid the biographer who strives to paint him exactly as he was.

The central impression which long impact with the mind of Coventry Patmore produced was that here was an example,—possibly the most remarkable example in England at that time,—of the intellectual and moral aristocrat. To no other man of his age was the general trend of the nineteenth century towards uniformity and solidarity so detestable as it was to Patmore. The give and take of modern toleration, the concentrated action of masses of men, whose units fit into one another, meant absolutely nothing to him. He would abandon no privilege for the general convenience; he watched the modern instinct warring against the solitary person, instinctively so hateful to democracies, and he defied it. Defiance was not a burden to him; he was "ever a fighter," requiring for complete mental health the salubrious sensation of

antagonism. But even here he was not pleased to face the crowd; he disliked its presence. His notion of fighting was to "fire his ringing shot and pass." He was a militant hermit of the soul, and it was as a hermit-thrush that he poured out his songs—for himself:—

> Therefore no 'plaint be mine
> Of listeners none,
> No hope of rendered use or proud reward,
> In hasty times and hard;
> But chants as of a lonely thrush's throat
> At latest eve,
> That does in each calm note
> Both joy and grieve;
> Notes few and strong and fine,
> Gilt with sweet day's decline,
> And sad with promise of a different sun.
> 'Mid the loud concert harsh
> Of this fog-folded marsh,
> To me, else dumb,
> Uranian Clearness, come!
> Give me to breathe in peace and in surprise
> The light-thrill'd ether of your rarest skies.

A certain hauteur to which these, like so many of his verses, testify, characterized Patmore in all the words and actions of his life. No one could enter the circle of his conversation without perceiving his pride in a sense of the distance which divided him, and those whom he esteemed, from

the crowd, the vast, indefinite *plebs* whom he disdained. His very cordiality, the charming sweetness of his affection, took a lustre from this general hauteur, since the few who were received within the wicket, who were allowed to share the sublime and embattled isolation, were flattered in their inmost nature by so gracious a partiality. He had a very strong sense of inequality. Without anything overtly arrogant, he was irresistibly conscious of a sort of supernatural superiority in himself. He would never have admitted it in words, perhaps because he would expect no sensible person to deny it. He was serene and kindly, but aloof; he was like a king in exile. He had something of the conduct of a dethroned monarch, of one who does not expect homage or wish for it, but who knows that his ideas are sovereign and his claims invulnerable.

His attitude to life,—at all events until the sad reverberation of his last years,—gave a constant impression of accumulated energy, a sense of plenitude. His temper was not parasitical, he did not lean on others or need them; he could stand quite alone. In speaking and in acting he preserved a strong sense of his own value. It was absolutely necessary to his temperament to run his own race, to speak his own thought. To quote his own words, again, he held that

Much woe that man befalls
Who does not run when sent, nor come when Heaven calls ;
But whether he serve God, or his own whim,
Not matters, in the end, to any one but him ;
And he as soon
Shall map the other side of the Moon,
As trace what his own deed,
In the next chop of the chance gale, shall breed.

This was Patmore's last word to time-servers, to those who bid him beware lest, in his wilfulness, doing and saying this or that, it might ultimately lead to that or this. He did not care in the very least, and when gentle friends like Aubrey de Vere entreated him to be circumspect and to spare the weaker brethren, Patmore turned from them in compassionate surprise.

If we study this mental attitude more closely, we find that it denoted the exercise of a singular moral independence. Patmore is not comprehended unless we realize that he deliberately arrogated to himself the right to perform certain intellectual acts which were of an exceptional nature. It appears to me that throughout his whole life in maturity he was training himself to absolute liberty in matters of will, although at the same time, by a paradox which must presently be faced, remaining strictly obedient to the laws of the Church of Rome. This led him to an ingenu-

ity of expression which sometimes appeared casuistical, but there was no real inconsistency. His independence enabled him to believe that he was never driven along paths which seemed those of obedience and renunciation, but that his spirit leaped ahead to obey before the order was given and to renounce in joy before the temptation was formulated. His attitude to certain persons within his own communion showed how anxious he was that his freedom should not be tampered with. The hot flame of the tyrannicide burned in his breast, and he was ready to destroy any one who threatened his individual independence.

In this connexion, nothing is more amusing than his life-long antipathy to Cardinal Manning, in whom, as by an instinct, he perceived the tyrant, the oppressor of others' will. Patmore never faltered for a moment about Manning, whom he described as being "as ignorant as a child in matters of philosophy, although his attitude on such questions was always arrogantly dogmatic." Mr. Basil Champneys has given a series of very amusing anecdotes and sayings which betray Patmore's undying hatred of Manning, whom, moreover, he once defined to me as "the worst type in history of the priest-ridden atheist." This, no doubt, was an example of what Mr. Champneys

excellently calls Patmore's habit of "expressing himself in words which exceeded rather than fell short of his actual sentiments." But it exemplified his passionate and temperamental dislike of Manning, which, without question, was fostered by certain personal incidents connected with Patmore's first and second marriages, but which I believe to have been yet mainly due to a partly unconscious sense of Manning's dangerous and insidious tendency to enslave the human will.

One of the later Fathers speaks of "that extreme indifference of the human will when once it has been reduced and liquefied into the will of God." Catholic metaphysic does not say that the soul acquiesces in God's will, because this would imply an act declaring its consent. There must be no act, but a total resignation, an extreme submission, what St. François de Sales calls "le despouillement parfaict de l'âme unie à la volonté de Dieu." Patmore had attained a consciousness of something like this long before he became a Catholic. In 1862, after his first wife's death and while he was still within the Anglican communion, he believed that God had suddenly conferred upon him "that quiet personal apprehension and love of Him and entire submission to His will" for which he had so long prayed in vain. This con-

viction survived the crisis which took him over to Rome, and became greatly strengthened and extended.

The paradox which seems offered to us by the steady and humble faith of a man like Patmore in religious matters, and his extreme self-confidence in everything else, is more apparent than real. Having satisfied himself to the full on the great spiritual question, being troubled by no species of doubt about that, his will was free to exercise itself with the utmost freedom in all mundane directions. If you firmly believe that your volition is melted into God's, there is no difficulty in supposing that if you find yourself wishing for something or approving something, that thing is also approved by God. Patmore made a tremendous effort not to allow the conventions of religion to compromise his will, and, once convinced of the rightness of his central orthodoxy, he had no superstition about the human arrangements of his faith. He was always wide-awake to the dangers of theological charlatanry, and his outspoken remarks on this subject were wont to amuse his friends and to scandalize strangers. His careful biographer has spoken of " the constant depreciation of the moral character of the priesthood " in which Patmore indulged. In the last letter of his life he referred to Omar Khayyam's disdain of priests

with high approval.[1] He took an absolute pleasure in the incongruity between the lofty vocation of these agents of grace and the frailties and defects of their personal conduct.

It is true that, as his closest friend has said, Pat-

[1] The whole of the vigorous letter in which this remark was made seems worthy of publication upon various grounds. It was written less than a week before he died. Patmore wrote it to explain why he was obliged to withdraw from a promise he had made to come up to London to attend a dinner-party. The vivacity and intellectual force of the language are remarkable in a dying man in his seventy-fourth year :—

LYMINGTON, *Nov.* 17, 1896.

MY DEAR GOSSE,—

I am quite a cripple to-day with sciatica. I am so sorry I cannot come.

I admire FitzGerald and Omar Khayyam greatly ; but a comparison of FitzGerald's translation with some passages of a literal prose translation by Charles Pickering, in one of the magazines two or three years ago, convinced me that FitzGerald had mistaken the meaning in some important points.

Nearly all Eastern poetry is more or less mystical and ascetic; and wine, love and liberty seem to me, in this Poem, to be words for spiritual passions and apprehensions, though FitzGerald has so translated it as to ignore and sometimes to deny this fact.

He has been right, however, in giving a literal intention to what concerns Priests and formal religion. All Poets and Prophets have hated Priests,—as a class,—and it has been their vocation, from the beginning, to expose "Ecclesiasticism."

Yours ever,
COVENTRY PATMORE.

more's "most severe attacks upon the priests were as often as not prompted by a rather mischievous humour which led him to delight in shocking those" who adopted the view that all priests should be regarded as immaculate.

Mr. Basil Champneys quotes a dialogue which he overheard between Patmore and a timid member of his own communion, who was, the poet thought, too feebly subjected to a supernatural awe of priests:—

Visitor. Weren't you surprised, Mr. Patmore, to hear of —— Church being burnt? I can't imagine how it could have happened.

Patmore. I know very well how it happened.

Visitor. Oh, I do so wish you'd tell me how.

Patmore. The priests burnt it.

Visitor. Why, what on earth should they have done that for?

Patmore. To get the insurance money.

After this a dead pause, then:—

Visitor. Weren't you sorry to hear that Father —— was dead?

Patmore. No, I was very glad.

One hears the very voice of Patmore in this amusing conversation, so admirably reported. More serious in its scope, but of exactly the same kind, was his independence with respect to the doctrine of Papal Infallibility. Patmore accepted

it in principle, absolutely, without discussion; but when it came to Pope Pius the IX's glosses upon it, he swept these away as "merely personal opinions of an amiable old gentleman, by which I am in no degree bound."

The same haughty independence marked his attitude towards the practical discipline of his Church. He was a mystic, indeed, of the highest class, but he declined to accept the ordinary paths to ecstasy. At one point he was admirably original, and this claims attention in any critical survey of his character. The typical mystic has no pity for his wretched body. In the practices of a vehement penitence, he reduces his physical condition to a transparency through which alone, as he supposes, the sacred light can shine. It is in ceaseless maceration, in a cloud of fatigue and anguish, in voluntary tribulations inflicted without mercy, that the saints of this extravagant type obtain their visions. St. Christina the Admirable broke the ice of wells in winter with blows of her forehead, and was rewarded by an ecstasy in which she experienced the seven sorrows of the Passion. She was an example, like so many others of her class, of a holiness which finds no access to the Divine until it can break down the walls of the vile cottage, "battered and decayed," which we name the body.

For this kind of penitential hysteria Patmore had the greatest possible disdain, and he held that if a man cannot dream without starving himself, it is better not to dream at all. In the face of the most extraordinary stories of perfection obtained through vexing corporeal penitences, he remained unmoved. Frankly, he disliked the sterile ideas of remorse and despair which underlie these extravagances, and he suspected a course of discipline which reduced people to a state of extreme physical exhaustion. He was in nothing more original and daring than in his glorification of the Body. When the mystics had done pouring contempt and hatred upon it, he took his turn and addressed it as—

> Creation's and Creator's crowning good ;
> Wall of infinitude ;
> Foundation of the sky,
> In Heaven forecast,
> And longed for from eternity . . .
> Reverberating dome,
> Of music cunningly-built home
> Against the void and indolent disgrace
> Of unresponsive space ;
> Little sequestered pleasure-house
> For God and for His spouse.

We need feel no surprise that the poet who could thus address the human body was anxious not to confound the lovely vision which he himself

The Mansion, Hastings.

enjoyed with the haggard and hysterical results of exhaustion and impoverishment. In his intrepid private conversation, Patmore never hesitated to pour scorn upon the anaemic ideal of the ordinary Catholic visionary.

In order to obtain the full effects of imagination in its active state, and to enjoy undisturbed his ecstatic visions of the soul's mystic union with God, Patmore was in the habit of withdrawing to some monastery for a certain part of each year. The custom of going into "retreat" is a common one among pious persons, who seek a period of retirement that they may devote themselves to self-examination and to special prayer. Patmore, who did nothing like other people, did not understand his "retreats" in this sense. He started for Pontypool or Pantasaph as a hardly-worked man starts for a holiday. He was wont to arrive among the monks in the highest animal spirits,—as he himself said, "quite Mark Tapley-ish." He was a welcome guest at a monastery, and I suppose that he appeared on these occasions at his very best. He laughingly used to complain that the monks fed him up as if he were a pig being fattened for the fair. Presently his spirits would sober down; he would become impatient of seeing too much of his innocent hosts, and the real business of the "retreat" would begin. He would

wrap himself round with solitude, until he experienced great joy and rest in his calm surroundings; then he would set himself to consider God in several of His infinite perfections. I recollect Patmore's making a distinction between meditation and contemplation. He remarked very justly, that meditation was a painful business, attended by labour and travail of the mind. These monastic "retreats" were occasions of rest, and he liked his thoughts to float passively on a stream of contemplation. Throughout, in these retirements, he preserved a wholesome and gay severity, without any species of religious pedantry.

The openness of his mind, where his curious prejudices did not happen to interfere, was always noticeable. His sympathy embraced Emerson, Swedenborg, Pascal and even Schopenhauer. With some of these it might seem difficult to connect the tastes of Patmore in any reasonable degree. But in the case of Swedenborg he was attracted by the closeness of his visionary teaching to that of the Catholic Church, although it was reached from an opposite point of view. "I never tire of reading Swedenborg," Patmore wrote; "he is unfathomably profound and yet simple. I came on a passage . . . which I don't know how to admire enough for its surpassing insight into truth and for its consistence with and development of

Catholic truth. . . . You will think it all very odd at first, but, after you have got used to the queerness, you will find that it abounds with perception of the truth to a degree unparalleled perhaps in uninspired writing." What pleased him in Pascal was the splendid evidence that great thinker gives of the possibility of conciliating faith and reason in their fullest sense. With the scorn of Pascal for the Jesuit Fathers, for their political piety and their casuistical morals, Patmore had an instinctive sympathy. When he himself was reproved for boldness in his expressions about the mysteries of the faith, he could hardly have found words which would better express his feelings than those in which Pascal rebuffed the suggestion that he should withdraw the *Provinciales*. So might Patmore have replied, about his own Psyche odes, " Loin de m'en repentir, si j'étais à les faire, je les ferais encore plus fortes."

A certain pessimism in general matters, united to or imposed upon his extraordinary optimism in particular instances, led Patmore to sympathize with those who have despaired of the system of human institutions. He was drawn with a vehement attraction to the dark philosophy of Schopenhauer, of whom he was one of the earliest students in this country. The tremendous effort which Patmore was always making to prevent his religious

faith from compromising his intellectual judgment enabled him to tolerate the apparent atheism in the German philosopher's system. But it is very curious to notice that Patmore, like Nietzsche long afterwards (in 1888), recognized in Schopenhauer an element which his general readers were far from observing. Each of them, from his diametrically opposite view, instinctively detected what was still Christian in Schopenhauer, and observed how much he continued to be dominated by Christian formulas. There is something humorous in finding an intellectual opinion shared in isolation by Patmore and—by Nietzsche! But the bellicose element in the former would probably have found something to sympathize with even in the violence of the latter.

In the ordinary intercourse of life it was impossible that Patmore should not be frequently misunderstood by those who did not appreciate his humour or who had no sense of fun themselves. He was mischievously contradictory, paradoxical and arbitrary, and he had a violent hatred for "sentimental faddists, humanitarians, anti-tobacconists and teetotalers." Yet he could be extremely sentimental himself; he was gentle and indulgent to animals; and few men of his generation indulged more sparingly in the legitimate stimulus of wine. But in all these movements he

saw an interference with personal freedom of action, a thing for which he was disposed to fight in the last trench. He was like the late Archbishop Magee, he would rather see England free than England sober. He pushed his argument to an extreme:—

"The bank-holidays," he wrote, "are a prodigious nuisance. The whole population of England seems now to be chronically drunk every Saturday, Sunday and Monday, Feast-day or Fast. It is very lucky. Nothing but universal drunkenness among the labouring classes can keep them from making use, i.e. abuse, of the new political power. It will be an unhappy day for England when the mechanic takes to becoming a sober, respectable man."

These are dark sayings, for Patmore was

> One, with the abysmal scorn of good for ill,
> Smiting the brutish ear with doctrine hard,

but they will not be misunderstood by any one who has mastered the political doctrine of the *Odes,* and who recognizes that Patmore believed our only hope of temporary national happiness to exist in stopping or hampering the results of the legislation of 1867. To him the effect of extended suffrage was inevitably an "unsanctioned" guidance of the ship of State:—

> helmless on the swelling tide
> Of that presumptuous sea,
> Unlit by sun or moon, yet inly bright
> With lights innumerable that give no light.
> Flames of corrupted will and scorn of right,
> Rejoicing to be free.

He had an exaggerated way of saying all things, great and small. If he heard a blackcap singing in the garden it became at once a nightingale, and in describing it a few hours later it became "a chorus of *five* or *six* nightingales." He could not moderate his praise or blame. Instances of the latter have been given; one of the former, very characteristic, occurs to me. In the presence of a number of men of letters, Patmore mentioned an accomplished writer who was an intimate friend of his. The conversation passed to the lyrical poems of Herrick, whereupon Patmore, in his most positive manner, exclaimed, "By the side of ——, Herrick was nothing but a brilliant insect!" There was a universal murmur of indignant protest. Patmore pursed up his lips, blinked his eyes and said nothing. The conversation proceeded, and an opinion of Goethe's was presently quoted. Then Patmore lifted up his voice and cried:— "By the side of ——, *Goethe* was nothing but a brilliant insect!" This was an instance of the blind violence of his humour, perhaps at its worst.

It was an attempt to take opinion by storm and to triumph over the bewilderment of his auditors; and truly, in analyzing such preposterous utterances, it was often difficult to know how much was conscious fun and how much mere daredevil wilfulness.

His humour often took the form of epigrams or lampoons, by far the most famous of which was that which he wrote in August, 1870, on occasion of the Emperor William's famous telegram from Woerth:—

> This is to say, my dear Augusta,
> We've had another awful buster:
> Ten thousand Frenchmen sent below!
> Thank God from whom all blessings flow.

Less known is a quatrain which he threw off on finding his mystical poems misunderstood by certain commonplace members of his own communion:—

> A bee upon a briar-rose hung
> And wild with pleasure suck'd and kiss'd;
> A flesh-fly near, with snout in dung,
> Sneer'd, "What a Transcendentalist!"

Nor did he spare Science, with which in later years he had entirely lost his early sympathy:—

> Science, the agile ape, may well
> Up in his tree thus grin and grind his teeth
> At us beneath,
> The wearers of the bay and asphodel,
> Laughing to be his butts,
> And gathering up for use his ill-aim'd cocoanuts.

There was some perversity in this also. He disliked "gush," and there is a story of his visiting Greenwich Observatory in company with Aubrey de Vere. They were shown through the telescope a new comet and other fine things, which filled them both with exultation, but De Vere unfortunately giving voice to his enthusiasm about the bigness of the starry heavens on the way home, Patmore suddenly "dried up," and maintained that the stars were only created "to make dirt cheap."

He cultivated the habit of writing occasional verses of compliment or humour, and it was noticeable that, however slight these were, they retained the general features of his style. I am permitted to print, for the first time, a playful address to a little girl, the daughter of one of his friends, and it will be observed that the *technique* of this trifle closely resembles that of some of Patmore's most mystical lyrics:—

To Miss Josephine Knowles.

A railway car, on Sandy Down,
With you, were Palace, Realm and Crown;
And tripe and onions, cooked by you,
Ambrosia were and honey-dew;
Whene'er you spin upon your bike,
I'll trot behind, your faithful tyke.
Water inflames a mighty fire,
So shall I but the more admire

The more you jump the old world's traces
With such exasperating graces ;
Yea, every Tory taste I'll banish
The moment Josephine turns mannish,
And if I write more poetry,
" The Angel on the Bike " 'twill be !

C. P.

Feb., 1896.

The personal appearance of Coventry Patmore has, most fortunately, been secured for posterity by the art of one of the most gifted of living artists, Mr. John S. Sargent, R.A. Patmore had a great admiration for Mr. Sargent's work; he wrote:—" He seems to me to be the greatest, not only of living English portrait painters, but of all English portrait painters." This was certainly a very happy spirit in which to approach the studio, and this enthusiastic appreciation survived the weariness of " sittings." These began in June, 1894, and on September 7 Patmore announced the completion of the work as follows: " As you were instrumental in getting the portrait done, I ought to tell you that it is now finished to the satisfaction, and far more than satisfaction, of every one —including the painter—who has seen it. It will be, simply as a work of art, the picture of the Academy," where, indeed, in 1895, it atracted universal admiration. In the same month of Septem-

ber, 1894, Mr. Sargent, saying that he had only done half of Patmore as yet, painted a second portrait, and later on the poet came up to town to sit for the Prophet Ezekiel in that great decorative composition which Mr. Sargent was painting for the Boston Library. There are, therefore, three portraits—the most important of them already transferred to the National Portrait Gallery—in which a hand of consummate power has fixed for ever upon canvas the apocalyptical old age of Coventry Patmore.

Splendid as these portraits are, however, and intimately true of the poet's latest phase, it is necessary to insist that he was not always thus ragged and vulturine, not always such a miraculous portent of gnarled mandible and shaken plumage. Mr. Basil Champneys gives a sketch of him in the prime of life, at about the age of forty:—

"It must, I think, have been early in 1864, that walking from Hampstead to Highgate in company with a friend who knew him, I caught sight at the corner of Caen Wood of a sombre, stately, solitary figure dressed in deep mourning. My friend introduced him as Mr. Coventry Patmore, and though but few words passed, what little he said left an impression of sadness, gravity and extreme reticence, entirely consonant to his appearance. He seemed as one who had passed through poig-

nant sorrow with unimpaired manliness and with increase of dignity. His personal appearance, so far as I can recall it, was then a good deal like the picture painted by Mr. John Brett (in 1855), and the more salient characteristics with which I was afterwards so familiar were rather indicated than developed."

They had become much more developed when I saw him first in 1879, but they were still far from giving him that aspect of a wild crane in the wilderness which Mr. Sargent's marvellous portrait will pass down to posterity. He was exceedingly unlike other people, of course, even then, but his face possessed quite as much beauty as strangeness. Three things were in those days particularly noticeable in the head of Coventry Patmore: the vast convex brows, arched with vision; the bright, shrewd, bluish-grey eyes, the outer fold of one eyelid permanently and humorously drooping; and the wilful, sensuous mouth. These three seemed ever at war among themselves; they spoke three different tongues; they proclaimed a man of dreams, a canny man of business, a man of vehement physical determination. It was the harmony of these in apparently discordant contrast which made the face so fascinating; the dwellers under this strange mask were three, and the problem was how they contrived the common life. The same incongruity

pervaded all the poet's figure. When at rest, standing or sitting, he was remarkably graceful, falling easily into languid, undulating poses. No sooner did he begin to walk than he became grotesque at once, the long, thin neck thrust out, the angularity of the limbs emphasized in every rapid, inelegant movement. Sailing along the Parade at Hastings, his hands deep in the pockets of his short, black-velvet jacket, his grey curls escaping from under a broad, soft wide-awake hat, his long, thin legs like compasses measuring the miles, his fancy manifestly "reaching to some great world in ungauged darkness hid," Coventry Patmore was an apparition never to be forgotten.

His relations with others partook of the incongruity which I have tried to note in his personal appearance. On one side, Patmore was sociable up to the very last, pleased to meet strangers, to feel the movement of young persons circling around him; on another, he was averse to companionship, a solitary, a hermit. He loved the society of the ladies of his family, but he was something of a Pacha even there. They were not expected to disturb his day dream, and sometimes he brusquely shook them off him. Then he would write to some male friend: "It would be a charity if you would come down now and then on Saturday and stay till Monday. I live all my days in a wilder-

ness of fair women, and I long for some male chat." Or, in these moods, he would break away altogether and come up to town, descending suddenly on some active friend, who would be always delighted, of course, to see him, but embarrassed, in the hurly-burly of business, to know what to do with this grim pilgrim who would sit there for hours, winking, blinking, smoking innumerable cigarettes, and saying next to nothing. Little parties suddenly collected to meet Patmore at luncheon or dinner were found to be the most successful form of entertainment; for though he would sometimes scarcely say a word, or would wither conversation by some paradox ending in a crackle and a cough, it was discovered that he believed himself to have been almost indecorously sparkling on these occasions, and would long afterwards refer to a very dull, small dinner as "that fearful dissipation."

He was so very loyal to his restricted friendships, that a fresh incongruity is to be traced in the notorious fact that he had sacrificed more illustrious friends on the altar of caprice than any other man in England. He had been intimate with Tennyson, Emerson, Browning, Rossetti, Millais, and Woolner, yet each of these intimacies ceased as time went on, and each was broken off or dropped by Patmore. He got a reputation in

some quarters for churlishness, which it is not very easy to explain away, yet which he did not quite deserve. The cessation of these relationships was due to several causes. In the cases of Tennyson, and in lesser measure of Ruskin, the youthful spirit of idolatry had given place to a mature independence not so agreeable to the idol. In these, and similar instances, when the tie had become irksome, it was snapped by what was called a "quarrel," an incident often of highly mysterious character. Every one who knew Patmore well has heard him tell the story of his "quarrel" with Tennyson. I was at pains to sift this anecdote, and was able to prove to my own satisfaction that it could not have happened. It was simply, I think, a casuistical mode of freeing Patmore's memory from the burden of Tennyson's influence. In this connexion, as Patmore's absence from Tennyson's funeral has been commented on, I am glad to take this opportunity of explaining it. Patmore was so anxious to be present that he came to London for the purpose, without waiting for the indispensable card of invitation. This latter was sent to Hastings by mistake, and thence to Lymington, and thence to town, reaching Patmore an hour after the ceremony began in the Abbey. Two years before Tennyson's death, the old friends exchanged kindly greetings through a third per-

son, but neither would write first to the other, and they met no more.

Another cause for the rupture of certain early friendships was religious sentiment. It must never be forgotten that Patmore was not merely a Catholic, but an enthusiastically convinced and strenuous one. His conversion to Rome severed many old ties, and he was not anxious that these should be renewed. His attitude to Rossetti was typical. He spoke of no one with more heat of resentment than of Rossetti; I remember that, on occasion of that poet's death, in 1882, I was bewildered by Patmore's expressions. He drew himself up in his chair, his eyes blazed, he was like the Prophet Ezekiel in his denunciation. He considered, so he explained, that Rossetti, more than any other man since the great old artist-age, had been dowered with insight into spiritual mysteries, that the Ark of passion had been delivered into his hands and that he had played with it, had used it to serve his curiosity and his vanity, had profaned the Holy of Holies; that he was Uzzah and Pandarus, and that there was no forgiveness for him anywhere. And even Ruskin, though in lesser degree, and with far less seriousness, for the affection here lasted warmly to the end, came in for fantastic denunciation. In these sallies, fun and earnest were indissolubly mixed, yet it was very far indeed from being all fun.

Patmore's austerity being, as it was, strongly emphasized by his candour of speech and virile intellectual independence, it is well to note that he was by no means, at least in the Puritan sense, ascetic. Nor, although so passionately a Catholic in all the fibres of his being, did he limit his sympathies to his own order. On the contrary, he was remarkably ready to annex to Catholicism whatever he approved of. The oddest example of this which I recollect, was the remark, to which I have already made some reference, which he once made about the boudoir novelists of the eighteenth century, Crébillon *fils* and Molière and Voisenon, "They are not nearly so vile as people pretend to think; there is a great deal that is Catholic in their conception of love." And Plato had his Catholic touches in the *Symposium*, and all the first pagan rapture in physical beauty was Catholic too. For a long time Patmore hesitated whether he should hang on the low landing which faced his front door at Hastings a life-size cast of the Venus of Milo or a reproduction of the San Sisto Madonna. The ladies of the household much preferring the latter, it was at length put up, but Patmore remarked to me, with a sigh, "The Venus would have been at least as Catholic." In all these instances he perceived in the innocent, sensuous form a symbol which but added a whispered and

exterior benediction to that solemn sacrament of marriage, which held so lofty a place in his conception of spiritual life. Greek sculptors, poets of the Renaissance, even the Crébillons of the world of patch and powder, seemed, to his broad vision, like those wild men who knelt in the narthex of an ancient Christian church, though they might never penetrate into the fane itself.

A singular characteristic of Patmore's, which demands record, were his occasional bursts of waggishness in reference to things which are not merely of solemn import, but to no one of more genuine solemnity than to himself. He once said to me, in this connexion, "No one is thoroughly convinced of the truth of his religion who is afraid to joke about it, just as no man can tease a woman with such impunity as he who is perfectly convinced of her love." He did not scruple to invent Catholic legends, some of which are now, we are told, in steady circulation among the devout. In particular, I remember a story about the dormouse, who was created with a naked tail like a rat, but who, seeing Adam and Eve eating the apple, and being conscious of a sinful longing, pressed what tail he had to his eyes to shut out temptation. He was instantly rewarded by the not very silky brush which has been the pride of his descendants. This Patmore invented, circulated, and had the ex-

quisite pleasure—so, at least, he affirmed—of seeing adopted into works of Catholic tradition.

It is entertaining to those who knew Coventry Patmore well to hear him conjectured of by those who never saw him as "mild" or "namby-pamby." In point of fact, he was the most masterful of men, the very type of that lofty, moral arrogance which antiquity identified with the thought of Archilochus. This partly essential, partly exterior tendency to tyrannize, to be a law to himself and others, to cut all knots whatsoever with a single, final slash of that stringent tongue of his, was, indeed, a snare to him. It obscured too often the sunshine of his sensitive tenderness, and in such poems as "The Toys" and "If I were Dead" a piteous proof is offered to us that he was conscious of this. His hand was apt to be too heavy in reproof; what to himself seemed tempered by its humorous exaggeration fell upon the culprit with a crushing weight. And then Patmore would be sorry for his anger, and angry with himself for being sorry, until the fountains that should have been sweet and clear were bitter and turbid with conflicting emotion.

Rarely has a knowledge of the man been more essential to the comprehension of his writings than was the case with Coventry Patmore. To understand the poems, some vision of the angular, vivid,

discordant, and yet exquisitely fascinating person who composed them is necessary. During a great portion of his life, the genius of Patmore was under an almost unbroken cloud; it was the object of ridicule and rebuke; even now, when honour is generally paid to his name, the extraordinary originality and force of his best work is properly appreciated by but few. It is my firm conviction that the influence of Coventry Patmore, as the master-psychologist of love, human and divine, is destined steadily to increase, and that a future generation will look back to him with a mingled homage and curiosity when many of those whose doings now fill the columns of our newspapers are forgotten. For, in this composite age of ours, when all things and people are apt to seem repetitions of people and things which amused some previous generation, Coventry Patmore contrived, unconsciously, to give the impression of being, like the Phœnix of fable, the solitary specimen of an unrelated species.

CHAPTER VII

LITERARY POSITION AND AIMS

When we take into consideration the splendid ambition of Coventry Patmore and the prolonged duration of his life, it is very curious to observe that he never contrived to finish a single work. We have seen that *The Angel in the House,* which was to have consisted of six sections, was dropped in 1863 at the conclusion of the fourth. The present collection of odes entitled *The Unknown Eros* is but a chain of stray fragments out of the poem on Divine Love which as late as 1866 he was still endeavouring to complete. Patmore's third great design, the poem on the Marriage of the Blessed Virgin, of which in 1870 he was "laying the foundation broad and deep," never rose at all from its too-ambitious basis. The causes of this failure to give complete expression to his own genius were many. But the most important of them, I think, was the excessive emotion which Patmore threw into his imaginative experience. Other poets of his age, notably Tennyson and Browning, made

poetry their business. They forced the ecstasy they felt into the channels of their art, and mastered it, instead of allowing it to master them.

Patmore, though not less of a bard than these men, was less of an artist. He had not the gift of imaginative storage; he could not, as Tennyson did, ponder for weeks on the execution of a theme, gradually building up the structure of his poem. Patmore was in his essence an improvisatore, only without the lightness, the fluidity, of the improvisatore. He improvised dark sayings, and flashed out gnomic prophecies in his cave. But he could only write when the intolerable inspiration descended upon him, and he had no power of storing poetic material. He excused his silence, on one occasion, by saying that one song, or a succession of songs, would not express what he felt; nothing but "the simultaneous utterance of *many* songs in different directions" could serve to relieve his emotion, which was, therefore, by a "mortal impossibility," stifled, instead of flowing into song. When the impulse was upon him, he wrote with a tremendous energy and self-gratulation, almost like a man consciously breathed into by a god. But this ecstasy could never be sustained, and in the deep depression which followed the moment of exaltation he sank to the belief that he was "nothing but a miserable self-deluded poetaster."

This, as the experienced reader will note, is a symptom by which we diagnose the born lyrist. This reaction, this agonized query,

> where slept thine ire,
> When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,
> Thy laurel, thy glory,
> The light of thy story,
> Or was I a worm, too low-creeping for death?
> O Delphic Apollo!

are the very signs-manual of the malady of the accredited singer, who is lifted high only to be dashed down the lower. It is to this temperament, without question, that we owe some of those bursts of song which still stir the very depths of our being after centuries of silence. But the curious thing is that Patmore never recognized in himself the singer pure and simple; he desired to excel in epic, gnomic and didactic poetry, and for success in these it is plain that he had not the temperament. He never realized this fact, and he even endeavoured to explain away the evidences of it. It is impossible to overlook the repeated occasions on which he asserts that his writings were the result of a prolonged effort of the intellect. Evidently he wished that they should be, and believed that they were. He wrote that every one of his mature books had been written "after many years of re-

flection on its subject," and in a sense this was doubtless true, but not in the sense he intended. It was in a mood of far juster self-observation that he spoke of the " discovery of the mode of treating a subject " being with him " co-instantaneous with the actual composition." That is the true experience of the lyrist, but this is not how epic and philosophical poetry are written.

Patmore was painfully aware that inspiration came to him fitfully and rarely, and that it left him soon. A fine pride preserved him from going on for a moment after he was conscious that the sudden illumination had been removed. His best things, he knew, had been written most quickly; several of his finest odes in less than two hours each. His attitude to poetry was very noble; much as he longed to express his mission, as he regarded it, he would steadily maintain a literary conscience. In 1868 he wrote, " Though, of course, I may not be a competent judge of how good my best is, I am sure that I have given the world nothing but my best." He long hoped that with age a greater freedom would settle upon him, that the heavenly visitant might be induced to come oftener, and to stay longer. He thought that each poet had a certain amount of original poetry in him, and that if he did not get it out of himself in his spring or summer, he might hope to do so in his autumn. But

Patmore's autumn brought a more continuous silence, and to the final edition of 1886 he prefixed the proud simplicity of this brief confession:—

"I have written little, but it is all my best; I have never spoken when I had nothing to say, nor spared time or labour to make my words true. I have respected posterity, and, should there be a posterity which cares for letters, I dare to hope that it will respect me."

There is no question that Patmore was sincere in this conception of his own artistic rectitude, and it is true that he spent a great deal of time in revising and altering what he had written. But it was an epithet, the turn of a phrase, or the arrangement of a rhyme that he changed, and it was very curious that the repeated editions of his early poetry continue to present us with blemishes which are of an essential kind. These were, in not a few instances, pointed out to him by critical acquaintances. Yet they were seldom removed. The fact was that Patmore, with the best will in the world, was unable to perceive them, and when they were pointed out to him he defended them, not with obstinate vanity, but with a blank bewilderment. When the revival of Patmore's fame began, about 1885, the new generation of admirers, whose opinion was founded upon *Amelia* and *The Unknown Eros,* were somewhat scandalized at the connubial vapid-

ities of the plot of *The Angel in the House.* One of the most ardent of these critics felt obliged to insist upon the fact that "this laureate of the tea-table, with his humdrum stories of girls that smell of bread and butter, is in his inmost heart the most arrogant and visionary of mystics." That was all very well, but Patmore, while accepting the second clause of this statement, repudiated the former. He could not be persuaded of its truth, although it is no longer necessary to quote examples of the extremely pedestrian narrative which marred the early poems. They cannot be defended, and the only interest they possess lies in the fact that Patmore continued to defend them. The matter is summed up in a witty, if rather cruel, sentence by Dr. Garnett, when he tells us that Patmore "had no perception of the sublime in other men's writings or of the ridiculous in his own."

In the early narrative poems, published at intervals between 1844 and 1863, what is now attractive to the reader is always the lyrical setting. This is devoted almost exclusively to an analysis of amatory instinct in its most guileless and paradisal forms. The portraiture of woman as a sort of household Madonna is carried through with great ingenuity. In those days the conception of love which Patmore had formed was still very simple; it scarcely passed beyond the worship of household

beauty. A recent French writer on English life, M. Robert d'Humières, has observed that our nation *n'aime pas la femme hors de sa maison,* and bases upon this cloistered habit some reflections upon the chastity of English imaginative literature. If there is some truth in this observation, then that erotic idealism of respect reaches its most intense expression in *The Angel in the House*, and it is in this that the element of lasting popularity in that poem resides. Nor would the element be reduced by the fact that Patmore's conception of this reverence in love is not genuinely spiritual, but physical and egotistical. This was what caused him so great a confusion when he definitely joined the Roman communion, since Catholic doctrine looks askance at any expression of complaisance with what is either sensual or mortal. Patmore's ingenuity was able to discover a way out of his dilemma; he persuaded himself that his conception of love embraced a sentiment of sacrifice accepted which endowed it with spirituality.

The reader of to-day will not be troubled by such scruples, and for him the difficulty of enjoying Patmore's early poems will be that of being interested in virtue which is so tamely happy and so easily rewarded. The household atmosphere in these works is like that in some of the domestic pictures of the period, an air loaded with the per-

fume of pinks and sweet peas, in some deep garden where no wind ever blows and where it is always afternoon. The Vicar's daughters arrive to play the old simple form of early Victorian crôquet; their crinolines cluster around the curate, who takes advantage of that shelter to cheat a little when his turn comes round; there is a faint buzzing of insects, the click of the mallets on the balls, an innocent light-hearted chatter, and Mamma is always not far off, in an easy chair, knitting some object out of rainbow-coloured wools. If a couple wanders off for a little while among the currant bushes, it is only in response

> To urgent pleas and promise to behave
> As She were there.

Between all this warm sweetness and the sharp, glacial air of the Odes, there seems to lie a chasm, but it is bridged over by *Amelia*, in several respects the most wonderful of Patmore's productions. It was written in four days at the beginning of 1878, and is, therefore, among the latest of his poetical writings. Notwithstanding this fact, it must be treated as a link between the narratives of the poet's Protestant period, and the odes of Catholic inspiration which date from 1864 onwards.

A word which has been very laxly used in nine-

teenth-century is exactly fitted to describe *Amelia*. That poem is in the strictest sense an idyl, a short ornamented narrative on a rustic subject; it belongs to the same rural type as the *Komastes* of Theocritus, and it blends in a like degree the character of the little epic with that of the ode. Very few modern pieces bear such happy trace of obedience to Wordsworth's direction that the poet should write with his eye upon the object. The whole atmosphere of *Amelia*, of its locality, of its ethics, of its language, of its landscape, is strictly individual. To speak first of its locality, though no place is mentioned, we identify at once "the little, bright, surf-breathing town," that

> Gathers its skirts against the gorse-lit down
> And scatters gardens o'er the southern lea,

as unquestionably Hastings, and every slight epithet that follows confirms the impression. The landscape is not less clearly individual. As the lovers walk through it, the scene takes certain aspects which are neither accidental nor indifferent, but each phase of which has its moral significance. In the following passage, the reader who does not seek to inquire deeply may be charmed with the freshness of a spring picture; to the closer student every segment of the description is charged with symbolism:—

> And so we went alone
> By walls o'er which the lilac's numerous plume
> Shook down perfume ;
> Trim plots close blown
> With daisies, in conspicuous myriads seen,
> Engross'd each one
> With single ardour for her spouse, the sun ;
> Garths in their glad array
> Of white and ruddy branch, auroral, gay,
> With azure chill the maiden flow'r between ;
> Meadows of fervid green,
> With sometime-sudden prospect of untold
> Cowslips, like chance-found gold ;
> And broadcast buttercups at joyful gaze,
> Rending the air with praise,
> Like the six-hundred-thousand voicèd shout
> Of Jacob camp'd in Midian put to rout ;
> Then through the Park,
> Where Spring to livelier gloom
> Quicken'd the cedars dark,
> And, 'gainst the clear sky cold,
> Which shone afar
> Crowded with sunny alps oracular,
> Great chestnuts raised themselves abroad like cliffs of bloom.

The subject of *Amelia* is not less original than its treatment. Never did a poet choose a theme more perilous, or one which must depend for its success more entirely on the sincerity of his thought and the distinction of his language. The hero of the poem is a man no longer quite young, who has

been betrothed (Patmore shrank, perhaps judiciously, from saying *married*) to a certain Millicent. She has died and has been buried in the churchyard close by. After a period of deep sorrow, he falls in love again, this time with one of a simple birth, and almost a child, Amelia. On the earliest occasion when her careful mother, a widow, allows him to take Amelia for a walk, he conducts her over the cliffs to the grave of Millicent. The position is one eminently natural, eminently pathetic, but it lies so far removed from the conventional haunts of the Muses that the courage of Patmore in adopting it is much to be admired. One conceives the cachinnation of the Philistines at the idea of an ode about a man whose idea of a pleasant walk for a young girl to whom he is just engaged is to show her the tombstone of her predecessor. Patmore, extremely moved by personal emotion, and supported by his own strange experience, was indifferent to ridicule. Nor can any sober critic read the lines which describe the approach of Amelia to the grave of Millicent without admitting that he nobly justified his boldness—

> While, th refore, now
> Her pensive footsteps stirr'd
> The darnell'd garden of unheedful death,
> She ask'd what Millicent was like, and heard
> Of eyes like hers, and honeysuckle breath,

And of a wiser than a woman's brow,
Yet fill'd with only woman's love, and how
An incidental greatness character'd
Her unconsider'd ways.
But all my praise
Amelia thought too slight for Millicent,
And on my lovelier-freighted arm she leant
For more attent ;
And the tea-rose I gave
To deck her breast, she dropp'd upon the grave.

The passage must be read in its entirety, but nowhere does Patmore give more splendid evidence of his delicate and subtle insight into the female heart than in the portraits which he contrives to indicate of the two maidens, each so demure, sweet and pathetic, and yet each so utterly unlike the other.

In *Amelia* the style of Patmore reaches almost its highest level of nervous vigour. The form of verse which he adopts is one which was introduced into English literature by Cowley, with whom, as I have already said, Patmore had considerable affinities. The later poet was born into an age of happier taste, and was forewarned against the errors of his predecessor. Like Cowley, however, he had evidently been a close student of Spenser, and the majesty of the *Prothalamion* has left its stamp upon its style. There is, too, sometimes a murmur here of that music of *Comus* and *Lycidas*

which is often heard more loudly in *The Unknown Eros*. But Spenser is the model, if model be not too strong a word for an influence so illusive, an influence which tinges *Amelia* as that of Tennyson tinged *The Angel in the House*. In neither case did the tone approach imitation or detract from Patmore's originality. He had been walking in these poets' gardens, but he brought back no blossoms with him; the most that could be urged was that his hands still carried the perfume of their roses.

It is to be noted that the peculiar ecstasy in the midst of which Patmore considered that his poetical talent descended upon him, accompanied the composition of *Amelia* to an unusual degree. It was partly for this reason, no doubt, that he always regarded it as the most successful of his writings, a view in which criticism will be not disinclined to agree with him. In fact, there is something in this poem which is positively tantalizing, for it seems to give evidence of a talent for interpreting in most dignified language the homely emotions of mankind which might have drawn the whole world to acknowledge Patmore's genius if he could have brought himself to exercise it frequently.

Among the odes of *The Unknown Eros* there is a small group which continues the impression formed by *Amelia*. These are eminently human in

Coventry Patmore.

From a sketch for Subject Group by J. S. Sargent, R.A., 1894

their character, and deal directly with emotions which are within the range of every man's experience. The death of the first Mrs. Patmore was succeeded in the poet's heart at first by a period of feverish despair, in the course of which he was the prey of every desolating illusion and every desperation of unavailing regret. Later on, to this terrible tempest of the soul there succeeded a halcyon time of peace, a sort of spiritual honeymoon of memory and meditation, when he reviewed the incidents of his loss no longer with rebellious hopelessness, but with gratitude to God and with serenity. It was at this time (June 13, 1863) that he wrote a memorable letter to Dr. Garnett, in which he was able to say that "my first nuptial joy was a poor thing compared with the infinite satisfaction I can now feel in the assurance, which time has brought, that my relation with her is as eternal as it is happy."

It is not in the agony of bereavement but in the calmer and less bitter period which follows that an artist recurs to incidents of his past anguish and gives them the immortal character of art. We have therefore no hesitation in supposing that it was in 1863 or 1864 that Patmore composed the exquisite odes which deal with incidents in the last illness of his wife. Mr. Basil Champneys has traced to the record of a dream in Patmore's jour-

nal the germ of that experience which is dealt with in "The Azalea":—

"*Aug.* 23, 1862.—Last night I dreamt that she was dying: awoke with unspeakable relief to find that it was a dream; but a moment after to remember that she was dead."

This was six weeks after Emily Patmore's death, and we cannot suppose that it was at this time or until many months later, that the ode was written. It may be interesting to see in what manner Patmore, when he came to deal with this reflex emotion in a dream, chose to treat it, especially as "The Azalea," being one of the shortest as well as the most perfect of his odes, lends itself to quotation in full:—

> There, where the sun shines first
> Against our room,
> She trained the gold Azalea, whose perfume
> She, Spring-like, from her breathing grace dispersed.
> Last night the delicate crests of saffron bloom,
> For that their dainty likeness watch'd and nurst,
> Were just at point to burst.
> At dawn I dream'd, O God, that she was dead,
> And groan'd aloud upon my wretched bed,
> And waked, ah, God! and did not waken her,
> But lay, with eyes still closed,
> Perfectly bless'd in the delicious sphere
> By which I knew so well that she was near,
> My heart to speechless thankfulness composed.
> Till 'gan to stir

A dizzy somewhat in my troubled head—
It *was* the azalea's breath, and she *was* dead!
The warm night had the lingering buds disclosed,
And I had fall'n asleep with to my breast
A chance-found letter press'd,
In which she said,
"So, till to-morrow eve, my Own, adieu!
Parting's well-paid with 'soon again to meet,'
Soon in your arms to feel so small and sweet,
Sweet to myself that am so sweet to you!"

This is a poem scarcely to be read, even for the tenth time, without tears, and we can hardly find a better example of the combination of several of Patmore's finest qualities, the extreme intensity of his emotion, the courage with which he bends familiar images and experiences to his art, and the singular distinction of the symbolism which he borrows from external nature. Even more harrowing in its expression of that hopeless longing for those who have been taken from us, which the ancients knew as *desiderium*, is the longer ode entitled "Departure," in which memory recapitulates the actual circumstances of the death of the beloved. This marvellous poem contains an example of what used to be called "wit," of strange inverted reflection, which is, to my mind, one of the most poignant things in all literature. The lover, hanging over the bed of the dear creature whose

gentleness and thoughtfulness have made her eyes "a growing gloom of love," then sees her depart abruptly.

> With sudden, unintelligible phrase,
> And frighten'd eye,
> Upon her journey of so many days,
> Without a single kiss or a good-bye.

In the bewilderment of his distress, it is not the endless bereavement that surprises him, but the discourtesy in one who never failed in the beauty of her manners before. He calls out that "it is not like her great and gracious ways," and his wretchedness is concentrated, for a moment, on the bitter disappointment that the only loveless look which she ever gave him should be that with which she leaves him. To the same category of things almost too poignant to be put into words, of fancies so sincere and sorrowful that they wring the very heart, must be added "The Toys," of which we have already spoken: "A Farewell" (where one of the vexations of separation is defined, as Wordsworth and others have defined it, in the inability to share emotional experience, so that

> no dews blur our eyes
> To see the peach-bloom come in evening skies);

"If I were Dead"; and the more mystical, but still

very human and direct "Tristitia," which may be taken as the poem which links this group of odes to the austerer numbers of *The Unknown Eros*.

On the political and satirical odes I do not propose to add much to what I have said in a previous chapter. Patmore's opinions about public affairs were important, I think, for their substance never, for their form sometimes. His theory that his country was "a corpse simulating life only by the exuberance of its corruption" was one which did not lend itself to fruitful projects for the future. Patmore was one of the most impassioned public pessimists who has ever lived; each party was the abomination of desolation to him, the Outs being only a little better than the Ins because they happened to be out.

Mr. Frederick Greenwood, who had a rare intuition into Patmore's character and a still rarer tact in dealing with it, contrived for a time to induce him to express, in verse and prose which could be printed, his grotesque views on current politics. But Patmore himself allowed that the newspaper which should print his untutored lucubrations would have to be named *Tom o' Bedlam*. The reforms introduced by Mr. Disraeli in the parliament of 1867 were greeted by Patmore with such jubilant irony as this:—

In the year of the great crime,
When the false English Nobles *and their Jew*,
By God demented, slew
The Trust they stood twice pledged to keep from wrong,
One said, Take up thy song,
That breathes the mild and almost mythic time
Of England's prime!

His friends, excessively alarmed at these prognostics, entreated him to fix for them the date of "England's prime," but he was unable to name a year. The ode from which these lines are quoted, if preposterous as prophecy, contains some noble and much vigorous rhetoric. In "Peace," in "1880–1885," and "Crest and Gulf," this quality, it must be confessed, occurs more rarely, and the poet too often descends to the note of an angry scold in the market-place, shrilling ever loudlier and less intelligibly because no one seems to heed. Patmore saw darkly that which he did not see with his bodily eyes. His own circle of life, his own family, friends and acquaintances were dowered with every charm and every virtue, but outside this ring he could perceive nothing but what he called "the amorous and vehement drift of man's herd to hell." Mere invective, especially when directed without insight or examination, to all public parties, is very tiresome, and Patmore's political odes are scarcely readable after forty years of historical

evolution, in spite of the nervous and picturesque phrases which abound in them.

We come, finally, to the large section of the odes where Patmore deals, in a spirit of daring and profound speculation, with the mysteries of religion. In an earlier chapter we have examined the conditions under which this magnificent body of metaphysical poetry was written. Patmore had become famous as the poet of wedded love, of the exquisite bond which unites woman to man. Now, in the maturity of his powers, with a command of the instrument such as he had never possessed in earlier years, he attempted a sublimer subject, the bond which unites the soul to God. St. François de Sales says that "God, continually taking fresh arrows from the quiver of His infinite beauty, wounds the soul of His lovers, making them clearly perceive that they do not love Him half so much as He deserves their love." Patmore had long seen that human passion is, or may be treated as, a symbol of the divine. His mind had been drawn to this parallel even before he became a Catholic, and the idea was strengthened in him by the study of some of the less mystical fathers, for instance, of the sweet and reasonable St. Bernard. Patmore did not consider that renunciation of all human pleasure in a monastic life was necessary to a high view of spiritual philosophy. On the con-

trary, as one of the pillars of the Church has said, "the innocent captives of marriage may sing the songs of Zion in a virginity of heart." It was a great principle with Patmore that the cell and the hair-shirt do not encourage high thought, but that the study of divine love may be pushed to the most secret recesses of its mystery by those whose daily life is made wholesome by legitimate occupations and sanctified pleasures.

The views which Patmore expressed, in highly figurative language, in the course of *The Unknown Eros* are fully discussed in his letters, and in the prose fragments which Mr. Basil Champneys has brought together with such ardent care. Patmore interpreted love as "the mystic craving of the great to become the love-captive of the small, while the small has a corresponding thirst for the enthralment of the great." This metaphor, taken from the phenomenon of sex, he expanded in a great variety of images and reflections, where the Deity was represented as masculine and active, and the human soul as feminine and passive. Coleridge had propounded the formula, the Father is thesis, the Son antithesis, the Holy Spirit synthesis. Patmore accepted and adapted this to the requirements of his sexual symbolism, defining Godhead as thesis, Manhood as antithesis and the Neuter, "which is not the absence of the life of sex,

but its fulfilment and power," as synthesis. The theory was worked out with extreme boldness and fulness in the lost prose treatise, *Sponsa Dei*, which Patmore was unhappily induced to burn in 1887.

The metaphor of sex runs through the whole of *The Unknown Eros*, but is, perhaps, developed most clearly in the three Psyche odes, in which indeed Patmore's genius may be said to have culminated. If we wish to study his metaphysical poetry at its most elaborate height of subtlety and symbol, we should pass at once to these poems.

To analyze would almost be to profane them; they are

> Preserving-bitter, very sweet,
> Few, that so all may be discreet,
> And veil'd, that, seeing, none may see.

They are founded on a favourite doctrine of Patmore's, that the Pagan myths, even when they seem gross and earthly, contain the pure elements of living Christian doctrine in symbol. He found these elements in such a story as that of Jupiter, Hercules, and Alcmena. How much more, then, should he find them in the starry legend of Cupid and Psyche? But his interpretation was not merely subtle, it was of a burning intensity, and it is not to

be supposed that the very elect would be ready to embrace it. As a matter of fact, in Patmore's lifetime the Psyche Odes were not a little of a stumbling-block to all but a few readers, who themselves were apt to feel that they wandered in these strophes

> sub luce maligna,
> Inter arundineasque comas, gravidumque papaver,
> Et tacitos sine labe lacus, sine murmure rivos,

as if in a land where words had lost half their meaning and ideas all their definition. It is a curious fact that "obscurity" in literature is a relative thing, and that the world soon learns to see its way through the twilight writers. Wordsworth and Tennyson were once thought "obscure," and it is only quite recently that people have ceased to seem affected if they do not find difficulty in Browning. With the key which we now possess, it should not be any longer hard to open the casket of Patmore's mystery, although it is not certain that all, or many, will be able to follow the symbolism to its extremity without finding that its audacity

> Stings like an agile bead of boiling gold.

Patmore was very soon assured of the fact that these poems were not welcomed, if understood—and least when understood—by a majority of English Catholics. He said in one of his letters that he

should have to wait for the invisible Church if he desired to be appreciated. In an unpublished letter Newman wrote that "I do not like mixing up amorousness with religion, since they are two such very irreconcilable elements"; and the scruples of the ordinary Catholic found voice in the entreaties of Aubrey de Vere that Patmore would moderate his ardour and suppress his later poems. De Vere was the type of extreme circumspection, who feared that Patmore would be "absolutely misunderstood through dulness or malignity," and that scandal would ensue. De Vere himself was an extremely reputable and sensitive Irish bachelor, of subdued manners and nice discretion, while the whole arc of his gentle experience contained no fact which could excuse the ardour of his friend, when, in a blast of incomprehensible religious metaphysics, he burst forth with

> Gaze and be not afraid,
> Young Lover true and love-foreboding Maid;
> The full noon of deific vision bright
> Abashes nor abates
> No spark minute of Nature's keen delight,—
> 'Tis there your Hymen waits!

But it was thus that Patmore's more ardent genius naturally ascended in rapturous communion to the Deity, and he could not bend his fiery footsteps to walk in cool, green meadows by the side

of weaker brethren. The fervour of his mystical and Catholic poems has been attributed to his admiration of St. John of the Cross.[1] I am ready to admit that the peculiar audacity of the Psyche odes, of "Auras of Delight," and of "Sponsa Dei" (the poem of that name, beginning "What is this Maiden fair?") may owe not a little to the encouragement given to the English poet by the study of his Spanish precursor's *Obras Espirituales,* but I must record that when, in 1881, I found Patmore absorbed in St. John of the Cross, and turning back every other instant with ecstasy to some inexpressible and almost intolerable rapture, I received the impression that he had but recently made the acquaintance of the Spanish mystic. Yet by that time his own line in the evolution of the sex-metaphor had long been taken, and many of his most characteristic odes had for several years been printed. It is true that he had long been familiar with Santa Teresa, whom it seems to me that Patmore resembled not a little in personal character. I do not know how it is that he quotes that "fair sister of the seraphim" so seldom, if at all, in his

[1] Patmore was acquainted with the poems of the great Spaniard only in a French prose translation. He would have admired, had he lived to read them, the admirable versions, in the metre of the original, which Mr. Arthur Symons published in 1902.

writings, and I cannot find her name in Mr. Champneys' volumes. I recollect, however, Patmore's telling me that Santa Teresa's *Road to Perfection* had exercised upon him a profound impression. Upon the body of his later poetry, no other influences are marked than that of St. John of the Cross in respect to matter, and of Milton and Spenser, to some faint degree, in respect to manner. This last is not to be insisted on. I confess I see little in later Victorian literature which bears the stamp of so much originality, combined with such absolute distinction of form, as the best of Patmore's religious odes. Their subject, of course, must always remove them from popular approval, but it is to be conceived that a small circle, of those who comprehend, may continue as time goes on to contemplate them with an almost idolatrous admiration.

When Patmore discovered, between 1878 and 1884, that the faculty for expressing himself freely in verse was leaving him, he began to embody his ideas in clear, nervous and aphoristic prose. He wrote four small volumes, the first and most brilliant of which, *Sponsa Dei*, no longer exists. The others, *Principle in Art* (1889), *Religio Poetae* (1893), and *Rod, Root and Flower* (1895), contain in succinct form a summary of what Patmore's loves and hatreds, prejudices and inclinations and

illusions, were in the last years of his life. *Principle in Art* deals mainly with the criticism of poetry and architecture, and considerable portions of this book had appeared, in one form or another, long previously. *Religio Poetae* covers a wider ground, but covers it in a much more fragmentary manner, mainly, however, in the direction of proving that all subjects may be treated as religion, if a man of imagination be the teacher. *Rod, Root and Flower* is written with the violence of a paradoxical old man who feels that the end approaches, and who lifts his voice that he may be listened to. Its golden sayings and brief, unfinished essays will be read with delight by those who are attracted to the peculiar spirit of Patmore; to those who know him not, they may occasionally seem almost insane in their extravagant individualism. The author had never cared to meet his weaker brethren half-way; now, as Nero is said to have done, he invites them to walk in his garden, and darts out upon them, dressed like a wild beast, to enjoy their terror. The following is an example both of Patmore's latest prose style, and of the hard sayings in which his mysticism indulged:—

"The obligatory dogmata of the Church are only the seeds of life. The splendid flowers and the delicious fruits are all in the corollaries, which few, besides the saints, pay any attention to.

Heaven becomes very intelligible and attractive when it is discerned to be—Woman."

It was Patmore's theory that the Poet alone has the power of so saying the truths which it is not expedient to utter that their warmth and light are diffused, while their scorching brilliance remains wholly invisible. It is certain that this theory is a sound one, but he seemed to forget that the protection of the poet's word lies in his art, not in himself. Patmore, wrapped in the robe of his dark verse, might with impunity say many things which it was not convenient that he should say in open prose. But it is scarcely to be believed that the little transcendental essays which form the section called "Magna Moralia" in Patmore's latest book were not intended to be translated into the nobler order. They seem unfitted, in their present shape, to be submitted to us, because incompletely executed; or they give us the impression of very brilliant prose translations from some foreign mystic poet. If the reader, for instance, will examine the following passage:—

"The reconcilement of the highest with the lowest, though an infinite felicity, is an infinite sacrifice. Hence the mysterious and apparently unreasonable pathos in the highest and most perfect satisfactions of love. The Bride is always *Amoris Victima.* The real and innermost sacrifice of the

Cross was the consummation of the descent of Divinity into the flesh and its identification therewith; and the sigh which all creation heaved in that moment has its echo in that of mortal love in the like descent. That sigh is the inmost heart of all music,"—he will feel how close its substance is to that of some fragment of *The Unknown Eros,* and he will acknowledge that all it lacks to complete its beauty and significance is to be clothed in such verse as that of "Deliciæ Sapientiæ," or "Legam Tuam Dilexi." The later prose of Patmore, it appears to me, is not very important except as extending our knowledge of his mind, and as giving us a curious collection of the raw material of his poetry.

One valuable impression, however, we gain from a study of Patmore's later prose. We see him as the type, in recent English literature of a high order, almost the solitary type of absolute faith. He was no propagandist; he made no efforts of any conspicuous kind to communicate his belief to others. It was enough for him to enjoy with emphasis his perfect and spontaneous confidence in God. He was not touched by curiosity or doubt, and positive knowledge, of a scientific kind, was without attraction to him. A passage very characteristic of his captious and sarcastic indifferentism occurs in the ode called "The Two Deserts":—

Not greatly moved with awe am I
To learn that we can spy
Five thousand firmaments beyond our own.
The best that's known
Of the heavenly bodies does them credit small . . .
The Universe, outside our living Earth,
Was all conceiv'd in the Creator's mirth . . .
Put by the Telescope !
Better without it man may see,
Stretch'd awful in the hush'd midnight,
The ghost of his eternity.
Give me the nobler glass that swells to the eye
The things which near us lie,
Till Science rapturously hails,
In the minutest water-drop
A torment of innumerable tails ;
These at the least do live.

Such speculations, macrocosmic or microcosmic, were equally unfitted to attract Patmore's serious thought. He lived in a contemplation of eternity, and he saw the whole of existence in relation to it. There were no softened outlines in his landscape; he perceived as he thought, but two things, the radiance of truth, crystalline and eternal, and the putrescence of wilful and hopeless error.

The " difficulties " which assail the modern man did not approach him. His only trouble was lest the flame of love should burn low upon his personal altar. Excessive in all things, he lived in an atmos-

phere of spiritual glory, haughty, narrow, violent in the extravagance of his humility.

He was all prejudice, in one sense, and yet he had, in another, no prejudices. He embraced the unexpected in his scheme of Catholic symbolism, and in life he was profoundly indifferent to criticism of his lines of thought. Strictly orthodox as it was his pride to be, those who listened to his conversation were often startled by luminous appreciation of things which seemed to lie far removed from the simplicity of faith. This was because his imagination was so candid that each image and object made an entirely new impression upon it, unaffected by conventional tradition. His hatreds were impulsive and instinctive; he encouraged them because he looked upon them as an expression of the force with which he repelled evil. If he disliked anything it must be because it was evil, and he indulged his hatred as being the very crown of his love of good. He had no doubt about the path that he was destined to traverse, nor about his lovely and sufficient Guide along it. He stood up against the world, secure in his faith in God, and in poetry which is the handmaiden of God. By a just intuition, it was as Ezekiel that Mr. Sargent was impelled to paint this the latest and fiercest of our English prophets.

It is probably not very unsafe to predict what

Patmore's position will be in literary history. He does not stand quite in the central stream of the age in which he lived. He will not be inevitably thought of as representative of the intellect of his time, like Tennyson, nor as a spreading human force, like Browning, nor as a universal stimulant and irritant, like Matthew Arnold. His contributions to the national mind will be far less general than theirs, mainly because of his curious limitations of sympathy. Those who do not feel broadly may have a deep but they cannot expect to have a wide, influence. They cannot suffuse themselves into the civilization of the race. The individuality of the three poets I have named was soluble, and as a matter of fact particles of their substance flow already in the veins of every cultivated man. Patmore was narrow, and he was hard; there is that in his genius which refuses to dissolve.

Yet there is no reason why his fame should be less durable than that of Tennyson and Arnold, although it must always be smaller, and of a radiance less extended. Star differeth from star in magnitude, but a light is not necessarily extinguished because it is of the second species. Patmore will be preserved by his intensity, and by the sincerity and economy with which he employed his art. Like Gray, like Alfred de Vigny, like Leopardi (with whom he has several points in com-

mon), he knew the confines of his strength; he strove not to be copious but to be uniformly exquisite. He did not quite reach his aim, but even Catullus has scarcely done that. The peculiar beauty of his verse is not to every one's taste; if it were he would have that universal attractiveness which we have admitted that he lacks. But he wrote, with extreme and conscientious care, and with impassioned joy, a comparatively small body of poetry, the least successful portions of which are yet curiously his own, while the most successful fill those who are attuned to them with an exquisite and durable pleasure.

It is much to his advantage that in a lax age, and while moving dangerously near to the borders of sentimentality, he preserved with the utmost constancy his lofty ideal of poetry. His natural arrogance, his solitariness, helped him to battle against what was humdrum and easy-going in the age he lived in. He was not in any sense a leader of men. He lacked every quality which fills others with a blind desire to follow, under a banner, anywhither, for the mere enthusiasm of fighting. It was difficult even to be Patmore's active comrade, so ruthless was he in checking every common movement, so determined was he to be in a protesting minority of one. Yet his isolation, looked at from another point of view, was a surprising evidence

of his strength, and it is not difficult to believe that pilgrim after pilgrim, angry at the excesses of the age that is coming, and wild to correct its errors, will soothe the beating of his heart by an hour of meditation over the lonely grave where Coventry Patmore lies, wrapped for ever in the rough habit of the stern Franciscan order.

THE END.

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Coventry Patmore

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